

Mom Letters

Covering 1999 in Chicago

A novel by
Jack Brackitt

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For Dad.

Acknowledgements

Thanking everyone would almost be a book in itself. It would fill many pages, and I would still miss a lot of people.

So, if you have a question about who should be thanked for what, could you e-mail me at brackitt@yahoo.com. You'll receive a response, and – depending on the circumstances – I'll probably put the answer up on the book's website: <http://www.geocities.com/brackitt>. My plan is to make the website a timely source of information about *Mom Letters*.

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Character list by circle

The families are shown in age order, and the circles are in alphabetical order.

Immediate family	
Andy, b. 1998	son
Grimbo, b. 1986	cat
Jack, b. 1963	self/copywriter
Jimmy, b. 1994	son
Karen, b. 1961	wife/accountant
Ryan, b. 1989	son
extended family	
Mutte, b. 1883	great-grandmother
Grandma, b. 1901	grandmother/homemaker
Gram, b. 1903	grandmother/homemaker
Grandad, b. 1903	grandfather/bookkeeper
Grandpa, b. 1911	grandfather/doctor
Fritz Markley, b. 1929	father-in-law/locksmith
Martha Markley, b. 1933	mother-in-law/special education instructor
May-Jane Flick, b. 1936	godmother/principal
Neil Berensen, b. 1955	brother-in-law/IT professional
Irvin Nielsen, b. 1955	brother-in-law/doctor
Madeline Nielsen, b. 1967	sister-in-law/nurse
Peggy Brackitt, b. 1967	sister-in-law/nurse
Sylvester Brackitt, b. 1991	bird
Eva Brackitt, b. 1998	niece
Ava Brackitt, b. 1999	niece
original family	
Al, b. 1959	brother/lawyer
Dad, b. 1934	father/IT professional
Doug, b. 1962	brother/lawyer
Drew, b. 1970	dog
Mom, b. 1936	mother/writer
Sam, b. 1960	brother/artist
Chicago circle	
Angela Freeman	researcher
Brian Love	lawyer
Carl Freeman	English instructor
Chaim Popkin	lawyer
Chloe Goodfriend	art instructor
Chris	graphic designer
David Daniels	illustrator
Dorothy P. Woods	writer
Elizabeth Fluornoy	IT professional
Emily Freeman	playmate with Jimmy
Evan	artist
Guy Kitterman	classical musician

Gwen Martinez	daycare provider
Heather Johansen	editor
Henry Russell	sales professional
Jennifer Anderson	sales professional
Jessica Morgan	bank professional
Joe Anderson	CEO
Julie Clarke	office administrator
Kyle Edwards	IT professional
Lee Kirby	artist
Lou Morgan	home contractor
Maja Lorenzie	school counselor
Marco Tomez	security officer
Matt Benjamin	IT professional
Matthew Martinez	supervisor
Melanie Bricker	office administrator
Michelle Jennings	office administrator
Nikos	IT professional
Odin Martinez	dog
Paul Lorenzie	IT professional
Rebecca Johnson	doctor
Roz Sandburg	writer
Sarah Popkin	Marketing professional
Sari Fare	tailor
Sebastian	illustrator
Sid Fluornoy	sales professional
Tammy Lorenzie	playmate with Ryan
Taylor Johansen	playmate with Jimmy
Terrence Johansen	supervisor
Tommy Morgan	Playmate with Jimmy
Valentina	entertainment facilitator
Warren Sandburg	bank professional
Windy	dog therapist
Wyatt Sandburg	playmate with Jimmy
St. Louis circle	
Cleveland Como	sales professional
Bert Dunne	lawyer
Frank Dinty	IT professional
Jeff Larson	IT professional
Larry Lawrence	meteorologist
Louis	artist
Luke Westerhold	delivery administrator
Russ Orvis	entrepreneur
Scott Rush	editor
Tim Campbell	sales professional

1. January

1.1 Timeline

In Mom Letters, the first part of every “month chapter” is devoted to the timeline – some events that actually happened in the month.

OK – why isn’t everything that happened in January in the January chapter? Because this book is weird! Since a lot of Brackitt family activities aren’t time-related, they’re lumped together by topic. This will all become clearer as you go along...maybe.

Now, here are three notes I need to squeeze in before you get started.

1. A lot about the book is explained in the “Afterwords” section. You’ll find it after the December chapter.

2. We live on the north side of Chicago. My Mom and original family reside in St. Louis, and all that gets explained in a February section called “Goodbye to the family home.”

3. I’m 35 years old. My wife, Karen, is 37 (she doesn’t mind me saying so), and we have three sons. In this January 1999 month, Ryan is 10, Jimmy is five, and Andy is five months old. This makes for a great game of Three Billy Goats Gruff.

Dear Mom,

Last night we had a big blizzard. Once it was over, I walked through 21.6" of snow and returned three videos.

Karen: Did they clear the sidewalks south of us?

Me: I didn’t have to walk that direction.

Karen: Where’d you drop off those videos?

Me: Uh oh. Did I go to the wrong place?

Karen: Yes! Can you go back out? We don’t want to get lost video charges.

So, I tromped all over the neighborhood and straightened it out. The worst part: I couldn’t think of anyone to blame.

1.2 Andy at six months

Since Andy is changing more than everyone else this year, he gets a monthly update.

Andy's waving! This is a major deal. I see him and I wave. He brightens up, and then he throws both hands up and down.

Andy: Ah! Ah!

When Andy would climb up on furniture, I'd have to say, "No, baby!" He'd stick out his lower lip and cry. Now, Andy just stands next to the furniture, looks at it and cries. He removed the middleman.

I get Andy all bundled up in his pumpkin seat and carry him around like a package. I deliver him, and I might as well make recipients sign for him.

1.3 New car story

Part 1. Hatchback

Ryan had a vocabulary assignment at school, and here's what he wrote:

"My dad's SHABBY old car was a real BURDEN. All the repairs that it needed INDICATED how much he needed a new car. When I would say something his RESPONSE was that other things were more urgent."

He got an "A Excellent" on it.

Background: I have a blue '91 hatchback with 129,000 miles on it, and it's starting to fall apart.

Jimmy: This car is worth 29 bucks.

Me to carwash guy: I'm just going to get the basic wash – no deluxe.

Guy: Yeah.

He said it like, "Yeah, of course that's all you'd want."

The older boys and I sat in the hatchback.

Me: So, what's wrong with this car?

Ryan: The paint's peeling, and it needs new mats because they're all dirty. It needs to be washed. The whole car needs repairing. Your seat's torn – it looks like rats chewed on it. The head thing on my seat's busted. And it's a very dangerous car. The muffler's rotted. And the paint's peeling.

Jimmy: You already talked about the paint. Oh, and there's a crack right here.

Ryan: Let's just bury this car in the yard.

Jimmy: Why don't we get a new car?

Me: Because I'm broke.

Ryan: Why don't you just write them a check?

Me: I can't just do that. They'll arrest me.

Ryan: Oh, please.

Jimmy: Hold it – if you're broke, why do we still have our house?

Me: The bank owns most of our house.

Jimmy: They took it?

Part 2. Problems

Here are five of them:

1. The engine light would go on occasionally, and then exhaust came in through the heat vents. Oddly enough, this wasn't a problem, because the heater fan didn't work.

2. If I turned on that fan-less heater the radio stopped.

3. It often has a bad muffler, because it's set so low to the pavement. During one bad snow storm the muffler tore off completely, and some lucky guy got it.

4. This piece of oddly shaped plastic fell from under my dashboard, and I still don't know what it is. I put it in the glove compartment and hoped it wasn't part of the steering.

5. It has a bad case of the "mysterious dashboard rattles." This annoying mmmmmm sound came from somewhere near the...I don't know. I banged on the dashboard to stop it, and that made it louder.

6. A few weeks ago, I drove over 50 mph and the front end shook like a wet dog. I never noticed this before, because Chicago rush hour traffic goes about 30 mph top-speed – perfect for this car. (The shaking story is foreshadowing, by the way.)

On the bright side

Years ago, I installed this \$97 car radio/cassette deck, and surprisingly, it continues to work perfectly. I always wanted to talk with the workers who built it.

Me: You thought you were making some cheap junk car stereo, and here it's lasted four years.

Worker: Yeah! We figured they'd break as soon as people bought them.

Wow, four years.

Another good thing: The timing chain works. Seriously, do cars really have these things? I've never seen one, but car enthusiasts warn me about them – with all the fervor of a foot-stomping preacher.

Chainer: How many miles do you have on your car?

Me: About 100,000.

Chainer: Ohhh, my friend. You know, I was just like you. I drove my car very hard, and I never thought about my timing chain. Then one day I was on Damascus Road, and this light came on...

Part 3. Estimate

Now we get back to the story of the shaking front end. (See, I told you.) I took the car in for an estimate. A few hours later, the mechanic called me and sounded grim.

Mechanic: Let me tell you the simple part first.

Uh oh – if they divide it into sections I know trouble is coming.

In sum, the mechanic told me the front-wheels-connected-to-the-steering parts were all worn, and they would need \$1,300 worth of repairs. And the car has a resale value of \$200. Well.

I left Karen a voicemail about our problem. A significant amount of our marriage is conducted via voicemail. Karen left a message back. She was

optimistic about the whole thing, and she suggested I look for a new car. What's another payment, anyway?

Part 4. Reviewing

Long ago I chose the car I wanted – this particular four-door model. I went on the Internet and put a deal together with a dealership in the western suburbs. My car came in three types: The LE, the SE and the Cheap-E. What I selected is needless to say.

Buyer's note: The LE (priced \$5,000 more) offers many extras that cost the manufacturer little or nothing. For example, only the LE can be black, while mine is blah earth tone that looks like primer coating.

Saturday

We drove out west and laid down \$100 to hold a particular car.

The salesman thought it odd I didn't ask for a test drive, but that wasn't necessary. It's a new and familiar car – what's going to be unacceptable? But I gave in and tried it out. It felt like a rental car – one of those rolling marshmallows that puff up our roads.

Two things I noticed:

1. The seats are comfortable. That's another reason I never want a sports car, because they chisel their seats out of rock.

Sports car salesman: If you were driving in the Helsinki Grand Prix you'd want these seats, believe me.

2. The speedometer goes up to 140 miles per hour. Under what circumstance will I need to drive my car that fast? This is only good for the joy riders who'll steal it.

On the way back, I told Karen if we were desperate money-wise, we could put the car on a number of credit cards.

Karen: At least I'll have a new car to visit you in prison.

Part 5. Arrangements

What a pain to buy a car: upgrade insurance, get a loan, order the car alarm, install the truck bed liner – that last one was a mistake. My life is a mess already, and I have to make sure a man with my name doesn't take free ownership of the car.

Also, I needed to get rid of the hatchback, but I couldn't find the title. Hmm, that was a piece of paper I got nine years ago – odd that it was lost. This gave me the opportunity to write the state with a request...something I don't get to do often enough.

Monday

We arrived at the dealership to pick the car up, and the finance guy's computer system was being repaired. That took a few hours, so we watched a lot of daytime TV in their waiting room. One talk show was themed, "Who's the Father of My Teenage Daughter's Baby?" Finally they showed the real father, but the mother-in-law demanded a retest. After seeing the dad, who could blame her?

After the computer was fixed, we went into an office about the size of the cardboard box for a washing machine and signed a stack of papers.

My new car was fine, except someone forgot to put in the alarm system. Driving it home, I realized our insurance only covers this car if there's an alarm in it. I considered asking Ryan to sleep in the backseat with a baseball bat (and he would have). Instead, I found a pay phone, called the insurance company, and got an adjustment in our policy.

Me: That's wonderful. Now my wife won't beat me up.

Insurance guy: I understand.

What became of the hatchback? I sold it for \$20 so it could be repaired and sold to a worthy person. A junkyard would have paid \$50, but later they might've claimed I took advantage of them.

Part 6. Ownership

This car is so quiet I can't tell whether it's on or off.

I carry around a lot of two-liters bottles of soda in the car. In the hatchback trunk, the bottles rested comfortably, but they roll around in this new trunk. It sounds like a person is in there banging to get out, and that makes me feel less lonely.

Friday

I was heading home with Ryan. Suddenly, the cars in front of me slowed up and I had to brake. The guy behind me banged right into me – not ultra hard. We pulled over.

Guy: What happened?

Me: Well, we all braked, and you ran into me.

Guy: It's not my fault. Man, look at my bumper. I just bought this car.

Me, looking at my bumper (just scratches): It would be your fault, because you ran into me. But it doesn't look bad, so you want to forget it?

Guy, walking to his car: OK. Man, you're lucky.

Me: Now that I've got this new car, what are you gonna have to complain about?

Ryan: We'll see.

1.4 Morning

The short, non-time-related tales from the Mom letters aren't presented in the chronological order they were written and sent. Instead, they're grouped into different subjects, and "Morning" is the first one of these.

Ryan

Ryan went to bed with wet hair last night, and this morning he looked like a Picasso painting.

Me: Time to wake up. Ryan! If you don't get up, I'll start singing.

Ryan: I'm up.

Ryan: Can I have this bread for breakfast?

Me: Absolutely.

Ryan, eyeing it suspiciously: Why, what's wrong with it?

Me: It's fine.

Ryan: I don't want it.

Jimmy

Jimmy was already having a grumpy morning, and then...he noticed a dryer sheet stuck inside his shirt.

Jimmy: Errgh!

He angrily pulled it out and threw it to the floor.

I was getting the kids ready, and I called Karen at work.

Me to Karen's voicemail: Is Jimmy going to school or daycare?

Karen, from the kitchen: School!

I was loaded down with baby and briefcase, we were walking down the long steps, and I saw that Jimmy was about to take his Slinky® to school.

Me: Jimmy, that Slinky should stay here.

He handed me the toy, and I couldn't get a firm handle on it – the thing was falling all over the steps, and I was flopping around with it.

Jimmy: Dad, stop playing with my Slinky.

Andy

Andy awoke and sat up sleepy eyed.

Me: Hi, baby!

He gave me a squinty, "oh, please" look, clunked over and went back to sleep.

This morning Andy attacked Jimmy's remaining breakfast and knocked it over. While I was cleaning it up, Andy grabbed Jimmy's toothbrush and cup and threw them around. Apparently, we have a baby who creates diversions.

I put on Andy's shoes. Then, my shoes. Then, Jimmy's shoes. Then Andy's shoes again – because he pulled them off.

Karen

Good deeds and compliments become currency in this family.

Me: Thanks for cleaning the kitchen this morning. It looks great.

Karen: You're welcome! Can you do me a favor?

For breakfast, Karen ate last night's chicken curry.

Jack

I dreamed that I got up and went through my morning routine.

I have no problem picking a morning newspaper out of a public trashcan, but if it's got muck on it, I pass.

Family

Sometimes when we're getting ready, there's an infomercial running silently in the background. This morning, we were joined by women getting facials.

Jimmy: Mom, I can't find my dress shoes.

They searched all over.

Karen: Jimmy, you're wearing them.

We had a holdup – Jimmy couldn't cross the safety gate we have for Andy...it's between the kitchen and the living room.

Me: Ryan, help Jimmy get over the gate.

Ryan: Jim, c'mon!

Jimmy: No, I want Dad to do it.

Ryan: Here, I'll lift you.

Jimmy: No!

Me: Jimmy, Ryan's strong – he'll help you get over.

Jimmy, crying: Unh unh!

Me: Hey – just open the gate.

Ryan: Oh yeah.

And they did.

Talk

I wish the commercials would come out and say it: "...and no other cereal tastes more like wet newspaper."

1.5 Drew Brackitt profile

Quick note before we start: All of my original family members are profiled in this book, and their stories are delivered in whatever month they were born in. This puts our dog Drew first, and my Dad would have liked that.

Also, the story below introduces my three older brothers. Here they are...in their birth order:

*Al
Sam
Doug
Me
Drew*

“Jack, take your youngest brother out for a walk.”
– Dad, 1977

Introduction

A pedigreed black Labrador retriever was born on January 17, 1970. Dad paid the \$400 adoption fee and gave the puppy his official name: Drummer Brackitt. He got his first name because Mom loved the Christmas program where the boy plays the drums. Dad brought Drew home to us, and he became the seventh and proudest member of the Brackitt family.

Drew was...

- ~ 140 lbs, over double the average for a Labrador. He was almost the size of a Saint Bernard.
- ~ well-composed – except when it came to wanting food and outside.
- ~ afraid of the vacuum cleaner.
- ~ the smartest dog I’ve ever known.

Eating

Drew wolfed down almost every table scrap left by his fellow family members, and he wasn’t choosy. One time he ate Dad’s transistor radio.

In the Brackitt family, secretly snatching food from each other is a respected skill. Drew was the best in the family at this, and he knew it.

A Christmas story: Mom knew she shouldn’t give a dog turkey bones, so she carefully wrapped the carcass, put it into the trash can on the side of the house and pushed down the lid. A few hours later Mom looked into the yard, and Drew was running with the carcass in his mouth.

Bravery

Drew's oldest brother Al writes on this subject:

"The best Drew story is one of great courage. Circa 1977, this miserable mutt ran across our backyard and tried to bite me. Drew leapt out of the shadows, grabbed that dog by the neck, shook him five times, and threw him aside. The mutt hid behind a picnic table and barked feebly at Drew. That dog never tried to attack me again.

"I also remember a good story about this German shepherd named Dack. He was trained to attack. The owner was always bragging about his 'Killer German shepherd.' One time Dack attacked Drew. Drew rose up like a bear, grabbed Dack by his throat and held him. The owner and Dack both howled. Drew had a great deal of courage. He was an excellent dog and is sadly missed."

Activities

Drew's favorite activity was sleeping on the couch.

I would watch these B&W 16mm films at school about life on the farm. The dog was named Shep, he slept with one eye open, he was up before the rooster crowed, and he helped round up the cows.

I thought: Drew is nothing like this.

Drew's third oldest brother Doug worked more than any brother to give Drew the life he was supposed to have – as a retriever. Doug took Drew hunting for squirrels, but Drew chased them instead. However, Drew did love to swim in the lake, so all our cars had that long-lasting lake/wet dog smell.

Dad tried to get Drew to retrieve ducks, but Dad never shot one, so it was a moot point.

Duck: Did you see that down there? That hunter never had his gun ready, and his dog was just rolling in the grass.

Walks

Brother Doug would stand and cook at an all-night diner for eight hours, get off at 6:00 am, trudge a mile home, open the door, and Drew would jump around – wanting Doug to take him for a long walk. And Doug took him.

Sam: I enjoyed walking Drew and getting outside. He spent a lot of his time smelling everything, and that was fine with me.

If I was lying on the couch and Drew wanted to go out, he would stick his big face right into mine, then pant, drool, nudge and breathe on me for about five minutes. If that didn't work, he would walk on top of me and lay down on my chest. That would work.

Functioning

Drew pooped in the basement a lot. We family members were used to this, and we simply walked around his droppings. However, some visitors stepped in the wrong spot, and they were sent flying. (Basement floor + dog turd + shoe = airborne.)

Drew had the worst gas in the house. He'd lay in the family room and let out one that filled up the place. Then he'd give this look like, "What's that terrible smell?" And he'd walk out, clearly disappointed in us.

Family

Drew revered his Dad, adored his Mom, and knew his four brothers as his equals. One morning, we human brothers walked to school, and Drew was in the yard. A few hours later, Drew picked up our scent and walked a half-mile to come see us. He went into the building by himself (school doors were open in those days) and trotted down the halls. ...

The principal saw him and handled the situation well. He kindly took Drew by the collar to the school basement, checked his tags, recognized our family, and called Sam out of class. Sam tried to get Drew to leave, but the big dog wouldn't budge. He wanted to stay in the same place his brothers were at. The principal called Mom, and she arrived. She sat with Drew for a little while, told him that lunch was waiting at home, and he went back with her.

In the early 1980s, Drew was getting on in years and moving slowly. I arrived home after a few months at college, and Drew greeted me energetically.

Me: Why's Drew jumping up and down like this?

Mom: Well, he's happy to see you!

Really? That day I learned two things about our dog:

- 1) He could tell each of his brothers apart.
- 2) He could miss one of his family members.

We miss him too. In 1983, Drew quietly left his place on the couch and walked proudly into our hearts forever.

1.6 Music

Ryan

We were listening to a famous old song on the radio.

Me: This is a platinum record.

Ryan: It's Latin?

Me: No, platinum. It sold more than a million copies.

Ryan: It's Spanish?

Ryan put his the headphones on, but I still heard his music as loud as through a regular stereo.

Ryan was watching one of his cable music shows – a live concert by a band with five members who choreograph together and don't play instruments.

Me: They're lip synching – not really singing.

Ryan: No, they're singing.

Me: Son, I have some hard facts to tell you about lip synching. [And I did, in an instructive, parental way.] You know, I'd like your bands a lot more if they actually sang in concert.

Ryan: Well, your bands have long hair and they just stand there.

Jimmy

Jimmy wrote a new song:

Dad's a big scaredy cat

He's afraid to go to the store

Dad's the stupidest guy in the world

Dad's the oh so

Oh so

Stupidest guy in the world

Jimmy is taking guitar lessons. As our reward he gives concerts for us, and here's how it goes:

The performance is held on our top floor. Karen, Andy, Ryan and I take our places in the audience – we sit on the futon. Jimmy sits on a short black stool and rests his left foot on this gas pedal thing. Karen hands him his little acoustic guitar, and he plays, "Hot cross buns." We applaud.

Karen

Me: We might get tickets to a classical music concert.

Karen: Wow!

Me: You want to go?

Karen: Not really.

Jack

I can't tell the difference between country music and bluegrass.

Talk

We have a kids' music cassette that's a total ripoff – it's the exact same music on both sides. And geesh, why? They play copyright-free songs, so there aren't any royalty problems.

Music executive: I like this idea – have the same songs on both sides. The kids will never notice. In fact, they'll like it, 'cause they won't need to flip over the tape. We're doing a public service. I'm a friend to children everywhere.

I recently discovered these overnight sensation all-girl bands also make music. I only know them from the trashy celebrity TV shows and tabloids. Now I understand they also sing songs and release CDs.

1.7 Scandinavian furniture shopping

Friend Marco Torez and I went to the bigger-than-Norway Scandinavian furniture store out in the suburbs. Here's the breakdown:

Overall

This store is a mecca. It's the only place of its kind for hundreds of miles around, and people who are quasipolitan (meaning "city types who live in the suburbs") come from all over to buy their furniture. If the store were conveniently located, it wouldn't have nearly the business, because driving a long distance is part of the appeal.

The outside of the building is bright orange, and it can be seen by the Voyager 11 space probe. I would tell you how many floors it has, but I didn't pay enough attention. It's a big place – long escalators. Lots of furniture...as one would imagine. They have a play area just for the kids, an ice cream parlor, and a restaurant.

First date gal: Where are we going for dinner?

First date guy: The furniture store.

First date gal: Good. I can get an end table.

Items

We saw a display of "rag rugs" – brown, cloth floor mats that cost \$30 each. We have some rag rugs in our basement, and I'm glad to know their worth.

Getting down to price and value, let's examine one of their Scandinavian TV stands. It's particleboard with white paper laminate. If we went to a US discount store, that un-Scandinavian stand would be \$22. Here it's \$25, and it's designed in a Nordic land. That's a good deal. For three extra dollars we can tell visitors, "This TV stand is Swedish. Look at it!"

A true oddity in this place is their inflatable furniture. I sat on the end of an air-filled sofa and it rolled me to the floor. I re-sat carefully, and I spoke calmly to it.

Me: Don't move...we're doing fine. OK.

Sofa: Man, you're gonna puncture me...you've got a pen in your pocket, I know it!

Me: I don't. I promise.

Other unquosities

There are plenty of "they must do this in Scandinavia" aspects to this store. For example, they provide peculiar looking baby strollers. They're verticalized, are a dull-gray metal, and have a lot of knobs at the connection points. They look like something steelworkers would build on a lunch break.

The store offers free paper yardsticks to measure the furniture. I guess if they had real yardsticks, bargain hunters would beat each other with them.

Employees there are called associates, consultants, or some title that's as inflated as their furniture. I'd tell my bosses there: Call me a schmuck and increase my pay.

Checkout

The store has a lot of accommodations, but fast checkout isn't one of them – it took about 20 minutes. Next time we'll bring friend Lee Kirby and have him stand in line for us. Marco and I will eat lunch, browse around, watch some Denmark TV (Hamlet marathons), select our items, and Lee will be ready at the register for us.

1.8 Supermarket

Ryan

Ryan: You're only taking me to the store to annoy me.

Ryan: Pleeze don't make me go into the store.

Me: Why not?

Ryan: Because they play stupid songs and you sing them.

Jimmy

I was at the grocery store with Jimmy. We were in line, and Jimmy was studying the candy. I released a little gas. This would have gone unnoticed, I promise – but Jimmy stands a lot lower than most.

Jimmy, announcing: Daddy, you had gas!

Me, sheepishly: Yes, Jimmy. What candy do you want?

Jimmy: I'm going to pull my hat over my face so I don't smell your gas.

And he did.

I was at the store and called home to see if we needed anything. Jimmy answered the phone.

Jimmy: Hello.

Me: It's Daddy.

Jimmy: What are you doing?

Me: Can I talk to my mom? I want to know if we need anything from the grocery store.

Jimmy: We don't. I need eggs.

Jimmy sat in the cart and helped me cross things off the grocery list. Because Jimmy can't read, I told him the letter a particular product started with, he would scrutinize the list, make an assessment, and scratch something off. This worked fine...I just need to buy items that start with different letters. Then we heard a loud noise. This upset Jimmy, and he scribbled up the entire list.

Me: How can we see what else to get?

Jimmy: Dad, that noise startled me and made my eyes pop out.

Andy

We were outside the supermarket.

Jimmy: Let's take Andy into my special door.

This is the three foot high entrance that shopping carts get pushed through.

Jimmy went first, and then I scooted Andy into it.

One baby-formula maker is smart: They have a different illustration on the front of each type of formula – for us it's now rocking horses. This is for fathers who get sent out to pick up cans of formula for the baby.

Wife: Get the formula with the rocking horse on it! Can you remember a rocking horse? Rocking. Horse. Look at me. Say “rocking horse” for me. Picture a horse, and it’s rocking.

Karen

Karen was sending me to the all-natural grocery store for milk. Then she noticed we also needed jelly, and she asked me to get that. I looked at her. Me, asking telepathically: Wouldn’t all-natural jelly be too...natural?
Karen: On second thought, we’ll do without.

Karen asked me to call her on my cell phone when I got in the store, and she would help me select a certain type of cheddar cheese. My cell phone never works right when I’m that deep within a building – and that’s where the cheddar cheese is. So, I called her from the front of the store and started walking back.

Karen: Hello?

Me: OK, stay with me. I’ve got to go back to the cheese. I’m walking back there, I’m –

Karen: Are you there yet?

Me: No, I’m walking past the sodas, I’m wal –

Karen: Which cheddars do you see?

Me: Hang on, I’m almost –

Karen: Jack? I can’t hear you. Jack? Jack?

Karen asked me to buy her cranberry juice. She wanted pure cranberry juice – not cran-coconut or cran-avocado. So, I went to the store and made it a point to skip all the “cran +” drinks. But then, I could only find cranberry juice *cocktail*. Hmm – that’s not pure cranberry juice. So, I looked way on the shelf and saw this totally obscure brand. It was pure cranberry juice, made on a farm somewhere. I proudly took it home.

Karen, holding the bottle and looking skeptical: What’s this?

Me: *Pure* cranberry juice.

Karen: Oh, I meant cranberry juice cocktail.

Jack

Cans of soup are normally about \$2.20, but they were on special – two-for-one. I asked Karen how much we could afford to stock up on.

Karen: You can buy \$30 worth.

I figured that would be about 15 cans. This turned out to be incorrect.

For a while I was buying food at the grocery deli, but I stopped...because it’s almost as costly as eating in a restaurant.

I went to get this big 24-pack of toilet paper. It was the super-cheap brand, so the paper is very thin... it doesn’t have airy cushioning...making it quite heavy – more like a big block of wood. But I didn’t realize this when I pulled it down from a high shelf. The toilet paper fell on me – hard. I was thrown off balance,

and my glasses were knocked to the floor. Now, my bent glasses sit lopsided on my face, and I look like an alcoholic British actor.

I was in the checkout line.

Guy behind me: Somebody's number is lost.

Me: I'm sorry, what?

Guy: Lost. Permanently lost!

Me: Have a good day.

When I have to return something, I'll stand in line and rehearse my "here's why I'm bringing this back to the store" speech. And behind the counter is a 17-year-old with a nose ring.

When I put the food away in the refrigerator, I leave everything in their grocery sacks. The baggers usually put similar items together, so it all works out. For some reason, Karen prefers I not do this.

Talk

We have an all-natural food store in our neighborhood. They...

~ have a sign up in their butcher department. It explains how they treat the animals humanely.

~ sometimes give massages...near the food we'll eat.

~ have a big seafood section, and they sell these exotic fish – the ones with gnarly teeth, red warts and blobby triangular shapes. I guess people watch those deep-sea TV documentaries and say, "Look at that gross fish. Makes me hungry!"

This new mega-grocery store near us...

~ over-planned their entrances and exits – no left turn...no right turn. I can't figure out how to get in there.

~ sells dress shirts and ties, because it's long overdue.

1.9 Chicago profile: Dimensions

There are six parts to the profile, and this is the first one.

History

Thousands of years ago, this glacier was pulling back after a long stay in Illinois. Glacey (affectionate nickname) had done an admirable job leveling out the ground beneath it and creating all that fertile Illinois farmland.

But one day, tragedy struck: Glacey took a fall into a giant ditch. She broke a hip and was never the same again. That ditch became Lake Michigan, Chicago settled on the southwestern shore of it, and that brings us up to modern day.

Finally getting to the dimensions

Chicago is flat – flatty flat flat. You’ll only need a four-cylinder car.

You’ll also need a map of the area we’re going to explore, so I’ll draw you one:

Lake Michigan looks like this: U

Chicago’s aptly named Chicago River connects to the lake like this: -U

The river has north and south branches: >-U

We live up north: *>-U

Chicago stretches about 25 miles North-South and 15 miles East-West. It’s like a city in itself.

Here’s how Chicago fans out from the Loop. It goes from...

...businesses in the Loop – lots of banks, insurance companies and ad agencies

...to service companies (printers, office furniture stores), loft buildings, high-rise condos, an ever-shrinking number of manufacturers, and tourist places

...to homes, low-rise condos and fun bars

...to homes, apartments/condos and old-time manufacturers.

Where we live...

Our house is about a mile west of Wrigley Field (the most famous landmark in North Chicago), and we’re right in the middle of bustling intersections, bars, liquor stores, cabs, and restaurants with sidewalk dining.

When you want to identify a part of North Chicago, here are three ways to do it:

1. By neighborhood. There are over 70 of them, and they have names. In most cases, I can’t tell where one neighborhood ends and the other begins.

2. By intersections. Chicago is full of them. If a guy said he was in Chicago but he rarely experienced intersections, I'd say he was in the wrong city.

3. By ethnicity. A lot of immigrants settle in Chicago. A fellow explained the phenomenon to me this way: "It's like the Pied Piper. One immigrant comes to Chicago, makes it, and he tells others back at home."

Chicago isn't as congested as some big cities, but it does have a lot of humans. The city proper (or improper) has three million people, and the entire metropolitan area has 7.2 million. Sometimes it feels like 7.3 million.

Lake

There's no water shortage in Chicago, and that's because of Lake Michigan.

Since the 1870s, people have been fighting to get mega-polluting factories off the lakeshore, and thanks to them, there are parks next to most of the lake. There's even a runner/bike path that goes along the water for about 18 miles. Next time you're here, we'll jog it.

Five years ago I was on this path and a little kid, about four years old, was standing by himself. Very strange. This lady was walking in the opposite direction from me, and we both looked at the boy. Then we looked at each other. Then we started yelling out to the park:

"Hey! There's a kid over here!"

Wonderfully, a mother quite far away heard us and came running over for her child.

Me to the lady who also yelled: We parents have to stick together.

Lady: I agree. Have a good day.

Downtown, the Lake Michigan shoreline is about half a mile further into the lake than it was years ago, and that's because of landfill. After Chicago's huge 1871 fire, there was no place to put the rubble except into the lake...hence, landfill.

Every year, when the first winter storm hits, one group of snow-lovers swims in the lake. Twenty people get in and only seven get out, but they get their moment on the 10:00 news.

Beaches

Surprisingly, Chicago has sand beaches on Lake Michigan. They ain't no Gulf of Mexico beaches, but considering our inlandness, they're A-OK.

Chicago River

The Chicago River is most important from an historical standpoint. If there hadn't been a big river going into the lake, there wouldn't have been all the water

traffic/trade that built the city. Now the river is a cove for rich guys to park their sailboats.

Before 1900, the Chicago River flowed into the lake. Everyone threw their garbage and sewage into this river. They drank from polluted water that came out of the lake, and people got sick. ...

The solution was to 1) reverse the flow of the river – get the lake to pour into it instead of the river pouring into the lake; and 2) have that polluted river flow south – away from Chicagoans. To do 1) they used locks and gravity. For 2) they dug a channel that connected the south branch of the Chicago River (which originally was kind of worthless) with a big river that ultimately connects with the Mississippi. This meant St. Louis – 300 miles south – would have to deal with Chicago's sewage, and that was fine.

Streets

Chicago streets are laid out in a grid – some go N-S, and others go E-W. Theoretically, there are eight blocks to a mile, so all the roads are 1/8 of a mile apart.

If a suburbanite needs something from the grocery store, it's a three-minute drive. If I need something, it's an eight-minute walk. This is life in the city.

Chicago has bizarre problems. One year we had a terrible snowstorm, and all these vehicles were crawling on the interstate. Drivers couldn't leave their cars, and they crept along for at least 10 hours.

Pedestrians walk in traffic as if the car is the weaker one.

Walking in the city brings up a combination of smells: car exhaust, concrete, a lack of dirt and grass, and whatever food seller is close by. It's not like being in the suburbs, because I don't experience the sudden manure smells...unless someone is throwing his own.

There are a lot of homemade signs tacked to telephone poles: "Lose 30 lbs. in 30 days! Doctor guaranteed!" Why is a respectable doctor advertising in this way?

Chicago can confuse out-of-town drivers. For example: Two of our nation's major East-West (note that) interstates are 90 and 94. These highways come together and run North-South through Chicago – fine! It's just a quirky thing: "While these interstates in this major city, they're going to take a vertical swoop." However, those big green highway signs still say that 90 and 94 are going East-West – when they're actually going North-South. So, you come into Chicago from the south, drive up north on 90-94 to visit a friend, and the sign will say

you're going west. "Agh!" you say. "My friend says he lives north of Chicago – what happened?" It's a lovely experience.

Coming into town on Interstate 55, there are several billboards for whiskey. That says something about Chicagoans.

Repair people like to strap stuffed animals to the front bumpers of their utility vehicles.

North Avenue runs East-West (not North-South). 2600 West North Avenue is North and Western.

Speaking of Western, it's the longest street in the world. I would have guessed some road in India would claim that honor, but no.

Chicago is continually under repair. Workers are out there making our lives better, and I don't have to help them do it.

Intersections

Several famous diagonal streets fan out of downtown Chicago. They look like spokes in a wheel, and they cut through the grid. This creates 1) big six-way intersections, 2) triangular-shaped buildings (because they're sitting in a wedge between, say a N-S street and a diagonal one), and 3) lots of car accidents.

One triangular-shaped three-story building near us was being remodeled, and the workers unwittingly knocked out some supporting beams. While the guys lunched elsewhere, the structure collapsed, and the exterior walls fell outward into the street. It made the news. Amazingly, no one was hurt.

Many intersections have no signs naming the streets. It's done so visitors will explore more of the city.

Friend Marco Torez knows more intersections than anyone I know.

Me: How about Elston and Central Park.

Marco: Sure, I know that. There's a chop suey place right there. And a pizza place next to that.

Lake Shore Drive

Lake Shore Drive is a huge deal. People sing about it. This eight-lane road is always well paved, partly because the city knows visitors like to travel on it. The main part of the Drive is about 29 miles long, and it's one of our country's scenic-est experiences.

Here's how it looks traveling north on the Drive: On the right, there's always a lake and sometimes a beach. On the left, there might be a ...

~ series of high-rises. The tall apartments/condos battle each other for lake views.

~ park...with the picnic tables, playgrounds and boom boxes.

~ sailboat harbor.

~ mansion...now usually home to an association or a school.

~ zoo. Giraffes get the lake view.

They don't allow pickup trucks on the Drive, because they're trying to keep it scenically pleasing. But a \$50 junker car is OK.

Parking

Rule of thumb: Parking in the Loop and the near north is nearly impossible, but it gets easier the further out you go.

Private parking lots have plenty of available spaces, because if a car is there illegally, aggressive moneymaking operations will tow it. Some of them...

~ were breaking into the cars they towed and stealing the radios, etc.

~ charge about 35% more if you pay with a credit card.

~ are kings of the "you'd better be nice to us because we have your car" attitude.

Friend Tim Campbell and I parked in one such lot, came out, and there was a tow truck going for my car. We ran and got to my car in time. But then the tow truck wanted to block us in the lot, and we had to race out of there. But why would they block us in – what could they have done? That part was kind of silly.

I always wondered how the city tows a car in a parallel spot, because the car has a vehicle in the front and back of it. Answer: They tow guys have this flat x-shaped jack thing that goes under the car's front, rises up, and rolls the vehicle out diagonally.

Finding a parking spot is like securing a nice parcel of land I'll own for a short time. "Hello, Mom? Guess what I got!"

2. February

2.1 Timeline

February just seems shorter.

We were in the car and for the first time, (sad pause) Ryan wanted to hear the totally funky teenage/dance/rap/thump, thump, thump radio station. Ohhh...I'll have to go through many years of this.

Jimmy created a Valentine, and he asked his Mom to write on the back, "Jimmy made this."

During Mardi Gras season, I celebrated by going to the all-natural supermarket for milk. I admired the new cute gals working at the registers...until I discovered they were guys wearing drag.

I'm now introducing our black cat Grimbo.

We were in our house, and I wanted to sit where Grimbo was, so I put him in another spot. But he wasn't happy with the body position I put him in, so he moved himself a little. He always does.

Snow

I was digging out a parking space. This car came slowly by and stopped.

Passenger: Why are you doing that?

Me: I'm putting my car in.

Passenger: But I don't see your car.

Me: It's up the street.

They stared at me.

Passenger: You've already got a spot up the street. Can we have this one?

Me: I wish I could. I'll give you the other spot when I'm done here.

Passenger: How long will that be?

Me: About an hour.

They stared at me.

Driver: Man, you got two spots!

And they drove off.

After the big snowfalls subsided, North Chicagoans finally got out to the supermarket. They looked Rip Van Winklish.

Yesterday the snow fell. I shoveled it, and today there was no snow anywhere. It all melted.

Lady on the radio: Yesterday I saw people out there shoveling – how stupid can you be?

Brother Sam visit

Today is Wednesday. No, Thursday. Brother Sam came into town and we had a fine time together. First order of business was getting something to eat.

A diner near us serves three eggs, toast and potatoes – all for just 99 cents. True! This is the only place I'll treat visitors. Sam ordered two 99 centers, piled both onto one plate, poured hot sauce over everything, and ate like he hadn't eaten in a week.

Sam drove back home, but he left a nice sweatshirt behind, and that was a good windfall for me.

2.2 Andy at seven months

Andy is trying hard to communicate. We play patty cake, and he's right there in the game. He doesn't give me a big laugh when we "throw it in the pan," but I think it's because he's concentrating on the action.

Andy likes to be held so he can stand. I can't blame the little guy, because he's been sitting or laying for 96 percent of his life, and it's time to stretch out.

I'll be lying on the couch, and Andy will climb up and peer down on me. I'll lose the "he's only a small baby" perspective...he looks like a mad dentist who's about to operate on me.

2.3 Goodbye to the family home

Are the Mom letters written only to my mother? No! I also write to my mother-in-law Martha, and my godmother, May-Jane Flick. That's especially true when Ma Brackitt becomes a central player in the story...and that's the deal now.

Here's the story of my trip to St. Louis. The objective: Say goodbye to our 33-year home, because Mom was moving to a nice new place.

Long background

At this point, I'm giving you a short history of our original family in St. Louis, because I can center it around our family house and...I dunno, it seems to fit here.

In 1958, my parents married, and they had four ne'er-do-well sons.

1960s

On July 17, 1965, we six Brackitts moved into our house. It's a ranch style with four bedrooms on the main floor, plus (thanks to efforts in 1980) two more bedrooms in the basement. The exterior is red brick, because there's a lot of red brick in St. Louis. It's on a corner lot, so we dealt with people driving on our lawn and tossing beer bottles, and sometimes they weren't even family members.

Our house received the typical punishment over the years – nothing too unusual.

Growing up, most of our household items were in an 80% workable condition. This included our light switches, garage door opener, screen door, bathroom tile, and carpeting. Only when something was beyond kaput did it get repaired...about a year later.

1970s

Of course, the most important event of the decade was the addition of Drew to the family.

We ignored many of the normal rules families followed. Mom happily gave up on the sit-down dinner each night, and neither parent tried to keep track of us. Instead, we kids made our own choices about what to do. While we made many atrocious decisions, none were fatal and we all learned from them – except Doug.

Example of our freedom: The brothers and I rode our bikes miles away from home at a time when neighbor kids weren't allowed out of their yards.

Notably, there's a precedent for all this. Dad grew up in a family of nine in a 250-person farm town called Brace in central Illinois. They had quite a rollicking household. Family members were always running everywhere, leading adventurous lives and coming back when they were hungry. ...

This type of household is more expected in a small town, because everyone knows each other, etc. But Dad introduced unregimented family behavior to 1970s metropolitan suburbia, and we were a fright in the subdivision. Though Mom didn't grow up this way, she supported having a boisterous household, because she was a free spirit in her otherwise-organized family.

1980s

In the late '70s/early '80s we kids went to college. I graduated in 1985, and – strangely enough – we all settled back in the house. It might as well have been 1964 all over again. The truth is we enjoyed being together. We were comfortable with the coming-and-going thing, and the kitchen had food.

As for the house itself, we had a lot of cars out front – three on average. A county cop asked a neighborhood punk about the goings on in the subdivision. Cop: And why does that one house have all the derelict cars out front?

Maybe he thought it was a questionable boarding house, and he would've been right.

Finally, in late 1987 I was the first to leave home for good. I moved to the big city – Chicago. Dad understood my reasons better than anyone else, because he always loved the Windy City.

1990s

Al was the second to leave home. In 1990, he moved into an apartment complex 1/2 a mile away.

Then Doug left. In 1991, he moved to Chicago and became a prosecutor for the city. But Doug came back to the family house, chose a bedroom, and started a law partnership with Al. He married Peggy in 1995, and Doug moved out for good because she was against living in the basement.

Goodness, Dad left next. In late 1996, he moved into the outstanding veterans residence in Cape Girardeau, MO – two hours south of St. Louis. Dad had a 10-year series of strokes, and while he was still conversant and self-mobile, the VA folks could give him the help he needed.

In 1998, Sam moved into an apartment near the airport. He was always helping to keep the family house up (mowing the lawn, shoveling snow, etc.), but Mom was planning a move to a condo, so everything worked out.

Mom was the last one left, and she would be leaving in a month. That's why I was going to STL. Uh, no, I wasn't planning to help Mom move. I wanted to ensure all my childhood possessions would either 1) survive the move to Mom's new home, or 2) go with me back to Chicago, because I was sure Karen wanted them in boxes in our living room.

Thursday prior to my trip

An e-mail exchange:

Me: I'm coming down for an official goodbye to our family house.

Al: We'll have a ceremony where Doug slips on a replica of a Drew turd in the basement.

Friday

When I arrived, a lot of Mom's stuff was already packed up in boxes.

Mom: I just did a little every day and got it done.

Me: What will you miss about this house?

Mom: I'll miss the curtains. I made those on my sewing machine.

Mom was upbeat about this whole business – she looked forward to getting into her new place.

To help the movers keep track of furniture, I got Mom to buy some colored dots, stuck them onto boxes, then created a chart that showed what color of dot went into what new room. If the movers weren't color blind or dogs, we'd be in good shape.

Mom, later: Your dot idea didn't work.

Friday night

I went to Al's apartment to hang out. He lives across from the New Cathedral, and just a few weeks before, the Pope had a Mass there. Yes, Pope John Paul II! Al threw a Pope party, and everyone stood on the balcony and saw the real live pontiff.

I watched their home video of the whole thing, and Al wasn't lying – there, on the TV, was the Pope out waving to the crowds. They had elaborate security for the pontiff. The Pope's guards wore all black, but I doubt they were priests.

Saturday

I got out the camcorder and made a video record of the entire home – documented every corner, wall and window. I made about two hours of tape, and next time there's a party, I'll show it to everyone.

Afterwards, we got together with Mom's handyman and our family friend Louis, and we drove out to her new home in Chesterfield – West County St.

Louis. Chesterfield is one of the nicer towns in the suburbs, and they have a mobile home park there.

I saw Mom's house, and it's nice! Now I'm glad she fought my attempts to put her into that boarding house.

Her home is one of three connected together. It's a town home, but it's more homey than towny. These places aren't big in front, but they extend way back – they're like three ranch houses set sideways and glued together. This is necessary, because in West County the "visible to the street" space is expensive.

Because the previous owner was in the process of moving, her new home had all the previous owner's furniture in there. It's odd how a buyer and seller quickly form a trusting relationship with each other.

The new place presented Louis and Mom with a whole new set of to-do's, and though they might not have said it, that pleased both of them a lot.

Saturday night

Sam and I went to his favorite bar and hung out with a couple of folks from our old high school. None of them threatened to beat me up, so I guess that's progress.

I have a good story about Sam, but you need some background first. Last summer I drove down to St. Louis, and we cleared 30-plus years of family junk from the attic and basement. We sorted it amongst the brothers ("Look, all my old school papers") and decided whether to keep things or take them to the dump. We had half the garage piled near the ceiling with pure junk. Sam had everything hauled away, and that was that. ...

I had rashly tossed a number of things I regretted, including my beer can collection and some books from my youth. I mentioned this to Sam.

Sam: You know, I think we can get back everything you need.

Me: What? You drove it all to the dump six months ago.

Sam: No, I couldn't throw any of our stuff out. I just took everything and put it in a big storage locker.

Me: You're kidding me. That must cost you a lot.

Sam: Yeah, it's about \$130 a month. ...

I had to tell Mom about this.

Me: Mom, did you know Sam has all that old junk in a storage locker?

Mom: Oh, I heard about it. You know, Sam shouldn't pay for that. I've got lots of room in my new basement, and he can put everything down there.

So, all that junk we almost threw out is going back to Mom.

Sunday

When I got home to Chicago, it hit me that I left my portable radio in St. Louis. Ouch! Where did I leave it? But then it also hit me: I had videotaped the entire house – I could find it that way. Acting like a crime detective, I watched the tapes, and...there my radio was, on a table next to the bedroom phone. I called Mom and we solved the case.

2.4 Clothes

Ryan

Ryan: I'm going to change my clothes.

Me: Aren't the ones you're wearing fine?

Ryan: C'mon, I slept in these.

I didn't know that mattered to him.

Me: Ugh, my shoes are wet.

Ryan: Microwave them.

Jimmy

I handed Jimmy his hat.

Jimmy, snatching it: Hey, that's mine!

Andy

I spent two weeks looking for my left slipper, and then Andy pulled it out of his toy box.

Karen

Karen is an air traffic controller and we're the planes. When one of us is off the flight pattern, she gets worried.

Me: Can you help me find my shoe?

Karen, pointing at the one I'd already found: It's right there.

Me: I did the laundry.

Karen: Did you run out of pre-treater?

Me: No, it's fine.

Karen: But there was hardly any left.

Me: Hm.

(I didn't use the pre-treater.)

Jack

Yesterday I tied my tie too long, and today it's too short. On average, I'm fine.

I'm trying out mending fabric on the elbow of this shirt. This is the third appliqué (fancy word) on the shirt, because the cloth is so weak that everywhere the patch stops, a tear begins. Ladies and gentlemen: The All Mending Fabric Shirt.

I bought these \$29 "leather" shoes, and...

~ they soaked this brown dye into my socks.

~ when I scuffed them, this white plastic appeared.

I concluded my purchase was a mistake. State prisoners riot against wearing shoes like these.

Family

Let's just surrender and agree that kids look neat with hoods on. They have that little round face peeking through – how could anyone not love hoods. Mittens don't have quite the same charm. Hoods are 3.7 times cuter than mittens.

Circle

Sari the dry cleaner is also a tailor, and I'll bring my clothes to him for repair. He's always sympathetic with my requests for service, but when I press him (play on words) he'll come out and say it.

Sari: Jack, I have to tell you. These pants of yours will never be good again. You're only wasting money. I cannot, in good conscience, try to fix them. Turn these pants into gardening clothes.

Would he classify half my wardrobe as gardening clothes?

Talk

I'm seeing a lot of ladies use plastic grocery bags as emergency rain bonnets. Who'd have guessed grocery bags would replace those little packed-up plastic bonnets that go into purses.

I wish sneaker makers would actually wear the shoes they sell, and see if the laces stay tied.

Why did sneaker makers get rid of the metal rings for their holes (eyelets)? When my laces lose their plastic tips – which always happens – I can't lick the ends and thread them through those holes. A celebrity jock endorser adds \$35 onto the price of shoes just so he can buy a new mansion, so five cents worth of metal eyelets get cut.

Why do some people wear chokers? It looks like they broke from their leash.

2.5 Andy's day

Since you're coming for a week, I'm heretoforthwith delivering a report called "Our six month old's entire day." Here it comes:

3:00 am?

Andy chooses his wake-up time more often than we do. He might scream for a ba-ba at any point, then he'll probably want to stay up and watch the overnight shows.

6:15 am

Andy sits on my lap and looks with interest at whatever he cares to. Often he fixes his eyes on something up high, and I finally get to see his neck.

My goal is to keep the baby happy so I can get us out of the house and to our destinations. He likes this one toy: It's plate-shaped, and little 'joystick barnyard animals' are stuck on top. Andy moves the pig.

Pig: Oink, oink.

It keeps him occupied for about five minutes. This is remarkable, considering he throws everything else.

I get Jimmy going and eating breakfast, and Andy sits in his stationary exerciser – this round command center. Warp speed to Planet Ba-ba. ...

I like this round thing because we originally had it with Jimmy, and it sat in the basement four years waiting for another baby. That baby's making much use of it, and we didn't stress the credit card.

7:30 am

I put Andy into his full-body coat. His arms stuck out to the side, and he looked like a lower case t.

7:45 am

Andy used to go everywhere in a handled pumpkin seat that became a car seat. Now I carry him to my car, and he sits in the middle big boy car seat. We drop off Jimmy at school, and Andy might fall sleep.

7:55 am

I drop Andy off at daycare provider Gwen Martinez's home. There, Andy is a big star and I'm his roadie. Andy and Gwen enjoy a nice day together.

4:30 pm

Karen takes Andy home around this time, I think. (I don't keep track of Karen's schedule, because it's hard enough for me to accept that I'm on a timetable.)

7:30 pm

I get home, and Andy can be in any number of places:

~ lounging with a bottle in the guest room.

~ sitting in his high chair

~ relaxing on the couch upstairs – surrounded by pillows and looking like one of those 19th century babies who was crowned king.

8:00 pm

Andy sits with me as I type on my computer. He lunges forward and bangs on the keyboard.

8:15 pm

It's Andy's bath time. Ryan was OK with baths, Jimmy hated them, and Andy loves them.

8:45 pm

It's near bedtime. Andy sits on my lap, brightens his eyes, and occasionally takes deep breaths. He gets a ni-night ba-ba and blanky, and I move him to his 45 degree angle bouncy chair. (Andy doesn't need to sit with someone in order to sleep.) He scrunches his blanky up to his face and kicks his legs. He nods off, and I carry him upstairs to his crib.

Me: You had a big day today Andy – we love you.

2.6 Food preparation

Ryan

I pulled Ryan's slice of pizza out of the oven and it fell upside down onto the hot oven door. The pizza started cooking on the door and they welded together. I pulled off what I could and gave it to Ryan. When the door cooled, I scraped off the cheese...and sure, I ate it.

Me: What do you want on your hotdog?

Ryan: Eh, the usual.

Me: The usual?

I baked a pizza for Ryan and cooled it in the freezer. About 45 minutes later...

Ryan: Where's my pizza?

Me: Oh! I forgot it. Hang on. It'll be nice for you.

Ryan: Nice and frozen.

Ryan has been particularly good lately. He even made a sandwich for Jimmy, which is something of a miracle.

Jimmy: Can I have an apple?

Me: Apples don't grow on trees you know.

Ryan: Hold it, Jim.

Jimmy

Jimmy wanted cereal, but all we had was raisin bran, and he doesn't like raisins. So, I surgically removed the offending raisins. A few minutes later Jimmy called for me. He silently poked at a wet raisin that I missed and gave me a disapproving look.

Me: Jimmy, there's no way I can take back the terrible thing that happened to you here. I can only give you a big, "I'm sorry," and promise to try and do better next time.

Jimmy: See here? I took a bite of it, too.

At my request, all the cookies in the house are hidden from me.

Jimmy: Can you help me get the cookies? Mom said it's OK.

Me: But then I'll know where they are.

Jimmy: Close your eyes then and lift me up – I'll get them.

So, I put Jimmy on my shoulders, and we stood in the pantry – me with my eyes closed. This went on too long.

Me: Have you got your cookies?

Jimmy: No. I don't know where they are.

Jimmy was in the kitchen and Karen's pot was beginning to boil.

Jimmy: Mom, the top is starting to shivel.

Jimmy is reading a book about vegetable soup, and it inspired him.
Jimmy: I wanna make vegetable soup.
Me: Why can't we just open a can of vegetable soup and eat it?
Jimmy: Mommy says she and I will make some. Me and Mommy will.
Me: You're gonna get all those carrots and stuff? It all comes in a can.
Jimmy: Mommy and me will make vegetable soup, and you won't get any.

Me: You want peanut butter and jelly?
Jimmy: No, just peanut butter and air.

Andy

I opened a jar of baby food for Andy and it smelled like dog food.

Karen

We had a cookie cutter that sat in the toy box for a few years, and Jimmy was determined to utilize it. So, he and I baked cookies. Karen was sitting with the baby in the living room and tried to assist from there. She gave lots of helpful hints...but I could hardly hear them.

Karen: Don't forget to gredserk!

Me: What'd you say?

Karen: Yes, that should help.

I did hear Karen say we needed to chill the dough, but I had no patience for that. As a result, the dough stuck to the cutter – this was problematic. So we went to Plan B: Jimmy shaped his own doughies (my name for pre-made cookies). He made a tyrannosaurus, a “bronziasaurus,” a handprint, a big “J,” and an elephant. They came out of the oven looking more like flat blobs, but he did it – and they were good.

Jack

I'm shopping for food scales so I can weigh my meals, but those scales they sell only go up to 16 ounces. Nothing I eat weighs less than a pound.

I eat about a fourth of my food while preparing it.

Oatmeal story

I decided to make oatmeal, and Jimmy observed.

Jimmy, looking at the flakes: Can I taste one of these?

Me: Sure.

Jimmy: Yuck! This is birdseed.

I poured the oatmeal out, and Jimmy had snuck a toy in it.

This hunk of butter fell onto the stovetop. Since the stove was hot, the butter pad melted and slid all over the place, and I couldn't catch it. I was 35 years old and chasing after butter.

While cooking, I added milk to my oatmeal, but that made it too soupy. So, I added oatmeal (making it too lumpy), then milk, then oatmeal. Finally, I made enough glub to feed the USS Theodore Roosevelt.

Talk

Household hint: What can be done with those ketchup, mustard, and soy sauce packets in our refrigerator door? I make a sassy nacho dip for our guests.

The toaster forces me to put my single slice of bread into the far left slot, and I think it's because that's one with the temperature gauge. Fine. But I still believe the toaster makers are on a control trip.

Life imprisonment should be given to those who put spaghetti noodles onto the plate before completely draining them.

2.7 Day in court

A month ago, I was in this relatively small town about an hour from home. I passed someone illegally, and while the kind cop didn't give me a ticket for that, I did get one for not having proof of insurance. I needed to stand before the judge and show that I indeed was underwritten.

This required a trip back to the town on the required date. I walked into their huge, ultra-modern court complex – “The House that Speeding Tickets Built.” Inside the entrance, my name was listed on this large electronic board that showed the courtroom I was supposed to be in. Did I deserve this public humiliation?

I went into said courtroom and sat in one of the pews, though I guess they're not called that. Here sat 70 other accused criminals and me. We were rounded up, and we looked it. They were my brothers and sisters in crime, and I felt this peculiar need to help them. At the very least, I wanted to pass around a hairbrush.

About five attorneys were up front representing some of us, and I wouldn't have guessed who among us had legal council. For example, a lousy punky guy had a lawyer, and an upstanding citizen like me was defenseless.

Those lawyers wore their day-to-day frumpy suits, which was expected. But then...in strode this wavy-haired Attorney Adonis in a sharp, double-breasted suit – quite a handsome fellow. Many of the women in the courtroom oh-so-casually fixed their eyes on him.

I thought: Ladies, get real. He's not interested in accused criminals!

Finally, I got called up to the judge. Here's how he looked at me: “You're sleaze, and I don't like you. Furthermore, I'm only going through the motions with this boring job until I reach retirement, which is 5,192 hours from now.”

I handed the judge my insurance information, and he reared back slightly – uh oh, I'd offended him. He blandly pointed to the man on my right (prosecutor?), and I gave him the paper.

Judge: August 28. [The date I was apprehended.]

Man: August 16. [The date I got the insurance.]

The judge then called the name of the next defendant, and I stood there baffled. His honor didn't say, “You're dismissed,” or, “Bailiff, escort this man out.” Should I have walked away and risked getting cuffed? The next defendant came up and started talking. I stood there like a mannequin until it occurred to me I was supposed to leave their presence. I certainly didn't want any connection to that next defendant.

I went to the clerk to pick up my driver's license. She looked over my documents and got this perplexed look. (Note: She was the first person to show an expression.)

Clerk: Mr. Brackitt, you didn't need to go to court. Next time just come here during regular hours and show your proof of insurance.

Me: Oh.

2.8 TV

Ryan

Me: Do you ever watch those talk shows where people throw chairs at each other?

Ryan: No, they're boring.

Ryan was watching TV.

Ryan: That guy's gonna be dead, if he ever lives long enough to find out.

We had to ban Ryan from the TV for a day.

Ryan: Can you tape my shows for me?

If a show is on Ryan's favorite kids TV channel he likes it. If that same show is on another channel, he doesn't like it.

Karen: Ryan, the TV's too loud.

Ryan: Can't hear you.

Ryan watches these super low budget made-for-cable pre-teen movies. They always start with a typical family, and then some strange variable is thrown into their lives. Three examples:

1. A robot helps the family out.
2. They adopt a pig.
3. One person is actually two.

They like #3, because it saves paying for an extra actor.

Me: They've got 140 characters on that cartoon? Wow. Can you name all of them?

Ryan: I can name some of them.

Actress on commercial: Come close and smell my breath.

Ryan: Lady, I don't want to.

Me: Why's your TV channel all fuzzy?

Ryan: I dunno, I didn't do it.

Me: I know you didn't do it. I'm just asking what's wrong.

Ryan: It wasn't me.

We were watching a show.

Me, being tutorial: This is a Japanese cartoon, and they redo the voices in English.

Ryan: Don't say that! Dad, we're kids – we want to enjoy these shows, not have you tell us things like that.

Jimmy: Yeah.

Jimmy

Jimmy gets mad when I set up a tape for him and fast-forward past the FBI warning.

Jimmy: Stohhhhp! I like this part.

With some of his tapes, it's the best part.

Jimmy had me watch this cartoon with him because it scares him. I did my best, but suddenly a monster jumped into the screen.

Jimmy: Aghhh! ...Dad! Next time hold me and cover my eyes.

Jimmy watched some Latin TV.

Jimmy: That's for Mexicos.

Jimmy has watched every "Mr. E. Dog" half-hour cartoon several times. Tonight we sat together and viewed one. At the show's beginning, our teen heroes were greeted by a Canadian Mountie.

Jimmy, whispering: That guy's the slime monster.

Jimmy has tantrums that last the commercial break.

Jimmy: I know how to spell TV: T V.

Jimmy was watching TV and I was paying attention to my laptop.

Jimmy: What was the last cartoon about?

Me, thinking fast: Um, these people and animals were chasing each other.

Jimmy: Oh yeah.

Jimmy will watch anything – and I mean anything – as long as it's a cartoon. He viewed an entire four-hour marathon of some imported junky show that was barely translated into English, and I figure it helps him learn about the world.

Jimmy: Was Hercules real?

Me: No, he was made up.

Jimmy: Dad, he's got a TV show.

Me: Jimmy, don't you want to watch educational kids TV instead of this?

Jimmy: Um, no.

Me: Jimmy, we really need to watch that instead.

Jimmy: Sorry, I can't.

Andy

Andy is at an in-between age. He isn't large enough to get in the way of the TV, but he does block the "beaming zone" between the VCR and our remote control.

This morning baby and I raced for the TV listings, and I barely won.

I was watching TV and saw, “No cassette” flash on the screen.

I thought: Huh?

Then I looked over and saw Andy playing with the VCR remote.

Karen

When we got cable TV installed, Karen ordered an extra 25 feet of cord behind each television set. We never use this additional wire, but if necessary, we could view three TVs on the sidewalk.

Me: I’ve never seen this whole movie.

Karen: You haven’t seen this movie?

Me: I’ve seen parts of it.

Karen: I can’t believe you haven’t seen this movie.

Me: Well, I haven’t. I’ve seen parts of it.

A few moments passed.

Karen: You haven’t seen this movie? I can’t believe it.

Me: Can you get over it so I can see it?

Karen’s 1800s costume drama films are so much alike, I know how they can save a lot of money: Dub a new story and script over the old movie and make a new one. For example: “My, what a splendid horse,” can be replaced with, “I love to go riding.”

Karen, watching one of her movies: That guy’s name is Will Byron. No...it’s Byron Will.

I wouldn’t have questioned either name.

I put out my hand and Karen held it. But actually, I wanted the remote.

Karen was watching a documentary on the 1970s sitcom with the singing family, and I walked in on the middle of it.

Me: Oh. They’ll have to do the bulimia thing.

Karen: They just talked about that. Did you see this already?

Me: No – this family has been profiled on like seven documentaries. Have they fired the one kid yet?

Karen: Yes, of course – that’s early on.

Me: They’ll also talk how the real dad was jealous of his son.

Karen: They said that’s coming up next.

Me: Mm hm. Did they show the star being naked on the magazine cover and shocking producers?

Karen: I haven’t seen that.

Me: Yeah, most of the profiles don’t mention it.

Karen: Maybe they’re showing good taste.

Me: No, they just don’t know about it.

Karen likes watching those movies where five 34-year-olds – one with a British accent – get together at somebody’s spacious rehabbed barn/house in Vermont, drink coffee in the kitchen, talk about their anxieties and start dancing spontaneously when the one putting away dishes starts making music with pots and pans. This improvised music is then placed on the film’s soundtrack.

Fact 1: Karen rents movies then falls asleep in front of them.

Fact 2: I sit in a chair in the same room with Karen, work on my laptop, and won’t get up for about three hours.

These two facts caused a problem when Karen got this totally annoying movie. She fell asleep while clutching the remote, and because I don’t get up, I had to sit there and watch this terrible film. Now, I’m more knowledgeable about the movie than Karen is.

Karen and I watched the news, and they showed amateur videotape of that dangerous nut who shot up the White House with a machine gun (luckily, no one was hurt). On the tape, there was this normal guy pushing a baby carriage, and normal guy ran over and tackled the nut.

Karen: If that ever happens to you, please don’t leave the baby carriage.

I thought: Under what circumstances would this happen to me?

Karen views these movies shown on lesser-known cable networks. I figure we’ll get a call from someone at the channel: “You were the one who watched! Can we talk to you?”

Jack

If I hit the wrong button on the TV, this bright blue box called MENU appears on the screen and takes over most of the picture. I’m stuck – if I hit any buttons to make the almighty MENU go away, it changes settings (“Sleep, Reminder, Caption, Vol. Bar, Language, Exit” – like we’d use any of these.) Two minutes go by before MENU figures it has better things to do and leaves. Shouldn’t I just simply turn the TV off? It might never turn on again.

I laid on the couch and watched this aerobics program.

Instructor to the camera: Look at you! You’re doing great.

Me: Thanks.

Karen was watching this *Macbeth* movie, and that leads me to say this: I don’t get Shakespeare. I’m sorry! I can’t understand what he’s talking about. I’ll hear two minutes of Shakespeare dialog and I’ll think, “Hunh?” Reading Shakespeare is even harder. Here’s an example:

The sentences get broken any

Which way, and I’m

Always pausing when I shouldn’t be.

When I watch these 24-hour news networks, I'm tempted to call their hotline and say, "Hey, that guy in the corner of your newsroom – yeah, in the light blue shirt. He's a loafer – tell him to get some work done."

This movie was on one of the cheapie basic cable channels, and it hit me that I'd seen this film in the theater less than a year ago. From theater to basic cable in less than a year – that was a poor cinematic investment for me.

Here's a weird thing about having a pay channel: I'll wander around the dial night after night, and I'll see a certain movie three times – but only the same 10-minute part.

Commercial: We have eight well-respected hospitals.
I thought: How many total hospitals do they have?

Family

Our photo album is filled with pictures of kids watching TV.

While watching TV, Ryan sits on the back of the couch, and Jimmy lies under the bed.

Jimmy, looking out: I like it here.

It's a parent's right to throw pillows at kids while they're watching TV.

Karen: What's wrong with the remote?

Ryan: Here, let me check.

He examined it..

Ryan: Did you soak it in water?

A snapshot of current TV watching in the house:

Jimmy is viewing the tape of the 24 cartoon channel that he had me make for him this morning – even though he could watch the channel live and get about the same thing.

Ryan is tuned into a kids award program. The show's producers tell the celebrities in advance that they won, then bully the stars into appearing. "All the kids will expect you!"

I haven't checked what Karen is watching, but it probably has subtitles.

I crossed in front of the TV.

Ryan: Move, move, move!

Me: I'm not gonna move – it's a commercial.

Ryan: It's a MonstaSquad commercial!

Jimmy: Dad, MonstaSquad is Ryan's favorite.

The two older boys were playing in the sink and got water everywhere, so Karen sent them upstairs. I happened to be up there.

Ryan, entering the room: Dad, don't ask.

They both sat on the couch.

Jimmy: Ryan – how about we watch TV?

Me: No, if you're being punished you shouldn't do that.

Ryan: Oh, you're a lot of help.

I wanted to watch television. But on our one TV, Ryan was watching the all-cartoon channel, and on the other TV, Jimmy was watching...the all-cartoon channel. They refused to view it together.

The cable was out tonight, so we actually interacted as a family. But then we found a videotape to watch, and things got back to normal.

Ryan does show a lot of patience with Jimmy when they watch TV together. They'll both be sitting in the kitchen watching a show.

Jimmy: Ah haaah heh heh! He can't do that! Ahh hehhh!

Ryan: [Rolling his eyes.]

Ryan: Can I watch my TV?

Jimmy: No, I'm watching!

Me: We'll flip a coin.

Ryan: I call heads.

Jimmy: No, I want heads.

Talk

I see these promos for this hospital show on TV. It's always "one you'll never forget," or "shocking." They said tonight's episode would be simply "compelling." Obviously, they're ashamed of it. ...

This show is at that stage where they lose half their original people, and they bring on actors with British accents.

A pre-recorded videotape for kids might contain one episode of a half hour TV show. The rental cost is \$2.98 – same as for a movie-length videotape. Ryan wants these short tapes but I won't go along. The whole point of renting a movie is having kids sit zombie-like for at least 90 minutes.

Why did Australians become the authorities for everything sold in infomercials?

One of the premium movie channels explained why they run the same movie every five hours.

Announcer: Our encore presentations let you see the film ahead of time and determine if it's appropriate for sensitive viewers.

I'm glad they clarified that. I thought they ran nonstop repeats because they already took me for \$11.00, and they want to give me as little as possible as often as possible.

Regarding TV documentaries: It's hard to have sympathy for downtrodden cultures when their traditional songs are playing so annoyingly in the background.
Photos: [1800s people working on farms.]
Song: Waaaaaaa wwwwhaaaaaaa waaaa waaahhhh!
Me: Turn that heart-wrenching music down!

I watch these senators during televised hearing. Regarding these staff people who sit behind them: Why aren't they working?
Friend to staffer: What did you do today?
Staffer: I sat behind Senator Bruhaha at the foreign relations subcommittee hearing, then I sat behind him at lunch. He wanted me to sit behind him at dinner, but I said no.

For decades, the kids cereal commercials have been saying, "enjoy it as part of a balanced breakfast." And so far, 12 children have.

This TV newsmagazine will promote a story thus: "He's a stay-at-home-dad. She's a working mom. Now they're divorcing, so who gets custody of the kids?" They should add, "Flip the channel for awhile. We're not gonna tell you who gets custody until the last three minutes."

Two comments about TV news:

1. Any time those trash entertainment shows have something I'd like to see, it's always, "And that's tomorrow on our show."
2. The local news has promos like: "Caught on tape – a mini-mart robbery gone bad," And the promo shows a little clip – fine. But those quickie previews are usually longer than the actual news stories. So, I'll just watch the promos and get all my news.

I saw this celebrity doing an extra-strength mint commercial. Who knew the star's breath is so foul?

When I watch the first season reruns of a long-running hit show, the actors don't have their confident, "I'm a star" hairstyles.

I watched this drama series about a 30-ish, ponytailed judge who goes out at night and wields vigilante style justice on the criminal defendants in his courtroom. To disguise himself in the wee hours, the judge rides a motorcycle and un-rubber bands his ponytail. So, these thugs have no idea that the judge before them during the day is the mystery man tormenting them at night. Apparently, they never notice the judge's ponytail and put things together.

Before cable, the British comedies shown on public television were really funny. With cable, I'm seeing bad British comedies, and their worst shows are worse than our worst.

3. March

3.1 Timeline

Grandma Martha and Grandpa Fritz are in town. It's always nice having you grandparents here, partly because you bring sanity to the household. To date, Fritz has played 1,039 games of solitaire on my computer, and I'm not exaggerating.

Ryan and I were driving home for dinner. He called Grandma on the cellular phone, because she was cooking something special for him.

Ryan to Grandma: Let me guess. Is it spaghetti?

Grandma said no.

Ryan: How about, is it mashed potatoes and corn and gravy and peas and...OK, I'll wait 'til we get there.

Important news: Ryan was on the playground and broke his arm. He slid down the slide without knowing it was wet, went too fast, and he fractured his forearm. Of course we're worried, but it was set in a cast, the hospital said Ryan will be fine, and he's feeling OK.

We're being hit with a huge late snowfall. These climate patterns are so suspicious – I'm starting to believe those groups who say the government controls the weather.

Serious news about Grimbo: He was moving strangely and slowly, so we took him to the vet. On Sunday, the vet said he had slipped into a coma. I should elaborate on this, but I don't know any more right now.

[A few days later] Excellent news! Grimbo came out of the coma, got back his appetite, and was his old self again. Our beloved cat will now require medicine every day, but that's no matter for us humans. He's a big part of the family, and we're going to all stick together.

[Another couple days later...] Every morning we have a Grimbo safari. The cat hides and sleeps somewhere in the house, and at 5:30 am we have to find him so he can get his medicine. Karen and I holler, "Grimbo!" and wake up the whole neighborhood. Passersby must think we're playing a bizarre version of Bingo...and so early in the morning.

I'm glad you became an election judge in your new town. If I applied for that, I doubt they'd even let me put up folding tables.

3.2 Andy at eight months

Andy now follows along with conversations. As I spoke to Karen, Andy looked at me and listened. Karen then replied, so Andy turned and looked at her.

Andy: Dglah.

Andy is attempting to scoot along, but his tummy is too big. Picture an egg trying to crawl.

Andy was playing with a toy.

Me: Baby, I hate to break it to you. You're doing something we don't mind.

Andy and his Mom like to say "Grrgh" to each other. It's like they're in a gorilla documentary.

It was near Andy's bedtime. He was tired and crying big crabby apple tears: "Ah hoo hooooo. Bllehehl. [Deep breath.]"

I sat with him, rocked him, and he calmed a bit.

Me: It's OK, little Andy.

I thought: There's only one time in Andy's life he'll be a baby, and I'll be able to comfort him this way.

3.3 Circle update

This section tells you what's new with some of the good folks in our lives.

Friend Jeff Larson came into town, because he travels everywhere giving computer classes. Jeff wanted to go to his favorite Chicago restaurant – an ultra-stylish Euro club for cool adults who love exotic racecar driving. The whole rambunctious Brackitt family took Jeff there, and though we aren't stylish or European, they still made us feel very welcome. Ryan played pool with the white ball only.

Jeff is single, and he always has good dating stories.

Jeff: I had a date with this one gal, and we had a good time. The next day she e-mailed a nice note, and she bcc'd her friend. The friend accidentally replied to "all," so I got her reply note. She said, "He's 35 and never married? What's wrong with him?" And she said things I can't say in front of the kids. Anyway, we laughed about it later.

Karen: Are you still dating her?

Jeff: No, it didn't work out.

That's the big story about Jeff! He has no luck with women – it never seems to happen for him. Following are some of his countless reasons. She's...

- ~ messed up.
- ~ moving to another city.
- ~ carrying more emotional baggage than O'Hare.
- ~ too young.
- ~ not my type.
- ~ got issues.
- ~ into having kids, and I'm not.
- ~ controlled by her parents.
- ~ always talking about her old boyfriend.
- ~ got everything – but she knows it.

Jeff is famous for remaining single.

Friend Bert Dunne: Jeff Larson, why don't you get married? You disgust me.

The whole love thing is weird with Jeff. Once he attended the wedding of a friend, and here's what happened:

Preacher: Do you take this woman to be your wife?

Groom: No.

Preacher: What?

Groom: Um, no.

The groom walked down the aisle and left. The poor bride just sat down on the alter. However, they still had the reception. Apparently, the groom's old girlfriend had suddenly appeared to prevent the marriage, and that gave him cold feet. A couple

days later, the groom's feet warmed up and he went back to the altered bride. They married in a civil ceremony, and gave their whole family unforgettable wedding memories.

Jeff: I've gotta get married so I can stop working out.

Jeff said he had \$20 to contribute to dinner – part of his travel meal allowance. I tried to keep the whole bill under \$20, but that didn't work.

I got lost taking Jeff back to his place. People trust me to drive them in Chicago because they figure I know what I'm doing – after all, I've been here 11 years. This time others get the blame, because they should know better with me.

3.4 Hygiene

Ryan

Ryan was taking his bath. I threw his pajamas into the bathroom for him, and they landed in the toilet.

Ryan took a bath, and came out wearing all the same dirty clothes he had on before.

Ryan: Can I have my hair like that singer – Justin Farentino?

Me: I don't know him. What's his hair like?

Ryan: It's like that guy from Muzicade: Adam Miliusi.

Me: I don't know him either.

Ryan: You don't know anybody.

Ryan: Did you brush your teeth?

Me: Yeah, why?

Ryan: It kind of doesn't seem like it.

Jimmy

Me: Do you want your hair combed?

Jimmy: Nyah.

Me: Is that a yes or no?

I handed Jimmy his toothbrush.

Jimmy, angry: Daddy, don't! I'm coughing! I coughed once and then again a little bit.

I was shaving with my electric razor, and Jimmy looked at me.

Me: Do you need to shave too?

Jimmy, rubbing the side of his face: Yeah, I feel a little rough right here.

Andy

Andy got the ba-ba all over his hair this morning, so I gave him a quick wipe head bath. Afterward, his hair looked like a fountain.

Karen

Karen was combing Andy's hair, and never got the "part your hair on the side" deal figured out (I guess it's a guy thing). She started at Andy's left ear, and swooped his hair in a northwesterly direction to the right top of his head. He looked like the infant Caesar in those 1950s wide-screen movies.

Karen: Come on messy boys, time to take a bath.

Jimmy: Mommy! You mean sticky boy.

Family

It's wrong to take the last toilet paper roll from the upstairs and put it downstairs, because this will eventually catch up with us.

Talk

To save time, it would be wonderful to have a barber who slips into houses and cuts the busy family's hair as they sleep. Obviously, there'd have to be some agreement beforehand.

3.5 Mom's March visit

Ma Brackitt joined us in Chicago. She took care of Andy while Gwen had the week off.

On Sunday, Jimmy and I picked up Mom from the airport. Because of Jimmy's height, he was able to get a first view of Grandma Alice coming down the steps. Jimmy broke three airport security rules and ran to give Grandma a big hug.

Our first stop was the ice cream place. Young Jimmy had to learn something we older Brackitts know too well: We sneak ice cream from each other. Jimmy was eating his sundae slowly, and Grandma and I had our long spoons moving in on him. Jimmy: Hey!

When we arrived, Karen had her girlfriends over, and Mom joined right in with them. They got into some adult topics, so I watched cartoons with Jimmy.

Here's a collection of stories from Mom's stay with us:

Mom: Johnny, your Internet connection is so slow – it's driving me crazy.

Me: Mom, when our family came to America they didn't have the Internet.

Mom: Oh...get a faster modem.

Mom wanted to read this paperback in our house, but we were using it to prop up the refrigerator.

During the week, Mom watched a lot of the house and garden channel, and she got hooked on this weeklong court case on the trial network. The verdict was just coming on, and... our cable company automatically switched from the trial channel to another station.

Mom, calling me: What happened to my verdict?

Me: I don't know.

Mom: Call the cable company.

Me: I don't think that'll help.

Mom: I'll call Al.

So, Brother Al phoned me from St. Louis.

Al: Here's what you do. Call any attorney in the town where the crime took place. I guarantee you – that lawyer's gonna know what the verdict was.

Me: I've got a better idea. You call a bunch of lawyers in that town and make a fool out of yourself.

Andy had a terrific time with Grandma (and so did the rest of us), and we thanked her very much for staying with us!

3.6 Car stories

Ryan

Me: You want to help me wash the car?

Ryan: I'd rather be locked in a room with Jim for a year.

Ryan, Jimmy and I were in my car.

Jimmy: Ryan, what did you do there?

No reply from Ryan.

Me to Ryan: Jimmy asked you a question.

Ryan to Jimmy: What?

Jimmy: What?

Me: Jimmy, didn't you ask Ryan a question?

Jimmy: No.

I was driving with Ryan, and the radio DJs said their photos were on the station's website.

Me: Did you see their pictures?

Ryan: Yeah, they're gross looking.

Ryan: I'm gonna slug you.

Me: Save up your slugs and give them to me when we get out of the car.

Ryan: OK.

Jimmy

I was moments away from buckling Jimmy in.

Jimmy: Buckle me in!

Then I was making a few adjustments before driving off.

Jimmy: Let's go!

The boy was having these moments I call "tell Jack to do things three seconds before he's about to do them."

We drove by six police cars all together.

Jimmy: Police are gonna lock them up in jail! Me and Ryan could catch any criminal 'cause we know karate. Criminals go to jail in the police apartment. Can we visit them?

Jimmy leaves the car like he's jumping out of an airplane.

Andy

The hatchback is low to the pavement, and it's hard to pull Andy out because I don't have the leverage – we're too top-heavy. But I found the solution. If I take my right foot and prop it under the driver's door, I become a (lever? block and tackle?), and out we go.

When Karen sets the car alarm, we can hear the “beep beep” from inside the house.

Andy: Mama!

Karen

Karen and I were looking for this place on Riverside drive, but the street signs weren't helpful.

Me: This can't be it. It's gotta be back there.

Karen: Jack, we're driving along the river, so this is probably Riverside Drive.

Me: Oh yeah.

Jack

The guy in the next car was playing Bolero, and I didn't want to see more.

I was driving and saw a car the same as mine – same year, color, and rust spots. I gave the driver a friendly double honk and wave, but he just looked at me.

I called the city.

Me: I'm John Brackitt. My city sticker went to the wrong address, and – Clerk, immediately: Yes, John Brackitt. We have your sticker right here.

Me: Wow. Don't you get a lot of those returned?

Clerk: Your sticker's been right here.

Family

Our car insurance is fine as long as we never have a claim.

The only thing that changes around here is the oil in the car.

Original family

Regarding the “fresh air/recycled air” switch on my dashboard: Brother Doug will get in my car, can't believe I have it on Fresh and switch it to Recycled. Two weeks later friend Nikos will get in my car, can't believe I have it on Recycled and switch it to Fresh. I can never put those two in the car together.

Circle

I'm borrowing Marco's car because mine is in the shop. If anyone blares their horn at me, I figure they're honking at Marco.

Daycare provider Gwen's husband is Matthew, and he's a car detailer. The other day, Matthew showed me this orange trash-mobile.

Matthew: This is my next big project.

Me: Oh man. Why would anyone pay you to fix this piece of junk?

It turned out to be Matthew's car for himself.

Talk

It's weird how some drivers have 10-foot long antennas on their cars. Hey buddy: Are the interplanetary messages finally coming in?

Illinois doesn't have full vehicle inspections, but they're wild about checking the emissions. I could build a car out of cabbage, and Illinois would only care about the exhaust. And there would be plenty.

If I lean on the horn at every intersection, it helps keep the traffic moving.

If a driver can have two bumper stickers on his car, he can quickly make the jump to nine.

It's wrong to avoid tollbooths by driving on the grass.

3.7 Quick shop

On most summer evenings, Ryan, Jimmy and I go to the quick shop. Here's an account of all that.

Preparation

I gave Ryan one of my white jackets so he'd be seen at night.

Ryan: Dad, I don't want to look like your evil twin.

Jimmy: You mean Uncle Doug?

Jimmy had a dollar you gave him and wanted to buy his own candy. He put the money into this light green nylon wallet he got from Grandma Martha and stuffed it into his little back pocket.

Journey

Sometimes we sneak out of the house, because that makes it more fun.

The quick shop is a 10-minute walk away, and we usually run. There are two home construction sites on the way, so we creep around in them.

Ryan: Can I have this door for my loft?

The bigger construction site has a lazy security guard, and he showed up just as we were done exploring his whole area. He must have been observing us from the nearby bar.

Guard: Hey, don't walk back in here.

Me: Yes, of course.

We arrive at the quick shop and go inside. Jimmy has trouble opening the door by himself.

Choices

The boys get slush drinks – ground up ice mixed with a flavor. Ryan gets all four flavors layered one on top of the other. Once he accidentally got some pina colada – he hates that – so he drank the layers around it.

Ryan wanted the big size bag of potato chips.

Me: No, you can have the small size.

He picked up the big size bag anyway.

Me: Hey – I said the small size.

Ryan: But you were looking at the big one.

Me: You can have something cakey to tie you over – like a donut.

Ryan: How about candy?

Me: No, but you can have cupcakes – something like that.

Ryan: Chips?

Me: No chips.

Ryan: Playing cards?

Jimmy: Did you try this candy, Ryan? I hate it.

Ryan: I know. It makes you wanna faint, and throw up doing it.

Selections:

Jimmy: chewy candy squares

Ryan: ice cream

Me: mini-bottle of whiskey sour

Loitering

Ryan: See that security camera? That's so if you do something bad they send you to juvenile detention. And then you know what? You go to military school, where they make you get up at 5:05 and go to bed at 4:00 in the day. And guess what: They make you crawl through the mud, and if your uniform gets dirty you've gotta wash it yourself.

Jimmy: By yourself?

Jimmy brought a toy to me.

Jimmy: Can I have this? I found it.

Me: I'm sure they're selling this. It's still in the box.

Jimmy: I'll ask them.

Paying

Jimmy picked out his candy bar, and wanted to pay for it himself with that dollar you gave him. He went up to the counter and gave the clerk his wallet. The clerk took the dollar out, and Jimmy was proud of himself.

Consuming

We walk to the park and eat/drink on the way.

Ryan: Dad, what's the green soda?

Me: It's the one loaded with caffeine.

Ryan said nothing.

Me: Your slush is all green soda, isn't it.

Ryan: Yes.

I look for opportunities to be helpful with Jimmy – pick his candy or drink up for him, carry it for him. As my reward, I quietly get some of it. One time Jimmy caught me and yelled.

Jimmy, after calming down: Dad, I'm very disappointed in you.

Ryan suddenly stopped, pulled his slush away, and paused.

Me: Brain freeze?

Ryan nodded.

Jimmy: This grape soda tastes too purpley.

Ryan stuck out his green tongue at me.

Me: I'm gonna call you Green Tongue.

Jimmy: Is my tongue purple?

Me: Yeah, it's real purple.

Jimmy: Dad, yours is yellow.

Extra

About six months ago, I walked by our quick shop and saw five police cars in the lot. I walked in and asked the clerk what happened.

Clerk: This guy came in, all drunk and walkin' around. I looked over and he had a handgun strapped to his side. That scared me, so I went into the back and called the police. ...

I looked out the store window and saw the man in question. He was lying on the pavement and quite subdued. All these cops were standing around him, and I doubt he still had the gun.

3.8 Toys

Ryan

Me: What have you been thinking about?

Ryan: I dunno.

Me: Have you been thinking about your MonstaSquad characters?

Ryan: Yeah! I was wondering if they were real big, like skyscrapers, as big as the building where Nan works. If Nan looked out the window at them she'd be like, "Whoah."

Note: Nan is Ryan's special name for Karen.

Ryan makes a lot with his connect blocks, and says his best work to date is his scorpion spaceship. We won't be surprised when, in 20 years, NASA unveils its crustacean fleet.

There's a toy battlefield on the floor of Ryan's room right now. Considerable damage was done to spaceships and transports.

Ryan and Jimmy were going to perform an electrical experiment on one of Jimmy's stuffed animals, but I said no. They were even getting batteries out of the remote control.

Ryan had this chain – it looked like a short dog leash. He flung it all around, wore it, tossed it from one hand to the other, and dropped it onto tables. This string of metal was annoyingly loud, and after several warnings, I took it away from him.

Ryan: But that's my chain! I take it everywhere with me!

In the drawer it went. That was two years ago, and that chain is still in there. Ryan never mentioned it again.

Jimmy

Jimmy: I got this toy from my cereal, didn't I?

Me: I guess so.

Jimmy: Yeah, I think I did.

Jimmy: I made a Trackimo Robot. It does the main thing that a Blastamo Robot does. Last time in Tokyo town, it just got 49 monsters and it'll come and get you. You'll be in boat races and it'll peel you with his superpowers. Then it'll go like this, and you'll be grounded to the ground.

Andy

Andy found a big whistle toy, and that's his new favorite. He sneaks up on me with it, and that's a memorable experience.

Andy has this little plastic tractor. When he pushes a button it yells, “Harvest time! Chugga, chugga, chugga.” I was watching TV, and that farmer began yelling, “Harvest time!” from the toy box. He’d stop every time I got close to the box, and start when I sat down again. He was mad that I wouldn’t help with the harvest.

Karen

Karen and I have different philosophies about kids picking up toys. Karen works on a theoretical level: We parents tell the kids to pick up their toys and they do. I work on a practical level: If the kids don’t pick up their toys they get boxed up and sent to the basement. The toys, that is.

Andy peered into the toy box. What he wanted was stuck lower, and he had trouble getting it out.

Andy: Eeeaaaahhhhh!

Karen: Hold on Andy, I’ll help you.

Talk

Toy makers should create kids’ playthings that look exactly like grownup items – no “happy baby colors.” Everything should look like small black electronic devices – because that’s what the toddlers want.

4. April

4.1 Timeline

Grimbo is the picture of health now. He has no trouble walking on Karen's face in the middle of the night.

Doug and Peggy bought a new house.

Karen: Are you jealous?

Me: Yes!

This weekend Jimmy has two birthday parties to attend. Here I sit, and this boy is out partying until three pm. It reminds me how our friends the Freemans had a golden lab – she was always at other homes visiting canine friends.

Angela Freeman: Our dog has a more active social life than we do.

The Freemans used to live below us, and their little Emily was only a few months older than our Jimmy – so they played together a lot. Coupla notes on them:

Husband Carl attended the country's most prestigious military training academy, and they had a system where the students policed themselves. Carl's classmates voted him to watch over their activities.

Angela worked for a Chicago research firm, and for one study, they interviewed many women on the effects of breast implants. It was a major secret, because some of the women's mates didn't know they had them.

I bought some fat free cheese and happened to show it to Carl.

Carl, alarmed: Get that out of this house! I don't want to see that.

(Oh gershies, he was joking.)

A few years ago, the Freemans moved to greener pastures in Denver...but we still e-mail a lot.

4.2 Andy at nine months

Tonight the baby tricked me. At 9:00 pm he acted tired (good – because I was also sleepy), so I gave him a ni-night ba-ba. He laid down and drank until 11:15 pm. Then he surprised me by standing up against furniture getting into everything.

Me: Baby, I'm gonna make you watch the Congress channel.

Together we viewed a meeting of the Committee on Rules. He rather enjoyed it.

When we last tuned in Andy wasn't crawling. We're making progress: Now he sits, leans down like he's going to get a toy, then inches a little – I think. Almost imperceptibly, he scooches across the room.

Like a commando, Andy is determined to scale the couch. He pulls himself up using his arms, legs and teeth.

Andy: Argh! Agh!

With Andy, so much person is concentrated into a little body.

The baby drained his sippie cup onto the couch and I sat near the wet spot. Then I started smelling this reawakened vomit that had dried into the fabric.

4.3 Circle update

We went to the Sandburg's house yesterday. They have a nice home out in Oak Park – where you and I went to see the Frank Lloyd Wright house. It was Roz Sandburg's birthday, and husband Warren and son Wyatt always give her a big party. I was recovering from a cold, so I mostly sat and ate all their homemade candied pretzels.

Oak Park is where hundreds of hippies decided to settle down and become homeowners. The Woodstock documentaries never tell this part of the story.

Also, I went for lunch the other day with friend Henry Russell. Henry could pass for a biker, but he doesn't drink and has nice handwriting.

Henry gets expressive with his stories.
Henry, in the restaurant: So I told the guy, [raising voice, wagging finger] "Buddy, you've got a problem!"

To people sitting near us, it looked like Henry was making a verbal attack on me.

Halfway through our lunch, Henry said he was a little perturbed because I didn't mention that he lost weight and stopped smoking. But the deal is this: I never observe those kinds of things. If people want me to notice anything, they need to tell me ahead of time.

Henry is so wild about his classic car, his kids asked him who he loved more – them or the car. He replied, "Hmm. I can adopt other children."

4.4 Jimmy's birthday

Me: Jimmy, how does it feel to be five?

Jimmy: Good.

We went to PizVid – the pizza and video place – for Jimmy's birthday. I got there late, and Karen was watching the boys. I sat down and ate some pizza. Karen came over.

Karen: Jack, this isn't our table.

Prices in this place are worth noting. They're always up-upping me with incentives – 'buy a super large pizza, get more tokens, and save \$10.' If I bought a franchise, I'd save \$45,000.

Ryan played skeet ball and got tickets – the ones you turn in for prizes.

Ryan: I'm gonna save enough for a cell phone.

(Indeed, they had the cell phone up there.)

Me: That's fine, but we can't pay \$30 a month to keep it going.

Ryan: Don't worry. They pay that, too.

4.5 Jimmy stories

Jimmy is a five-year-old who's experiencing his second childhood.

He and I were out and about.

Jimmy: We're walking on the United States of America.

Ryan

Jimmy: Could we buy that?

Me: We'll talk about it.

Jimmy: Yay!

Ryan: Jim, that means Dad's not gonna do it.

I froze – what would Jimmy say? But Jimmy let Ryan's comment pass, and I breathed a sigh.

We had to flip a coin over which TV channel to watch. Jimmy chose tails and lost, so he threw a fit at Ryan.

Ryan: Blame Dad, he flipped the coin.

Andy

Jimmy: Can we get a new tent? Baby wants one.

Me: Jimmy, what did you and Andy do today?

Jimmy: Andy and me lost our knowledge of that.

Karen

Jimmy: When we go to the zoo, can we see the lions and giraffes?

Karen: Oh yeah sure, of course we will.

Jimmy: But not the snakes, right?

Karen: Why not?

Jimmy: They're dangerous.

Karen: I'm sure they'll have them under glass or something.

Jimmy: I think they'll hypnotize me.

Karen: Let's get going.

Jimmy: I kno-ho! Err!

Jimmy: Mommy, I'm too big to wa.

Karen: Too big to what?

Jimmy: Yeah.

Karen: No, what are you too big for?

Jimmy: Yeah, I am.

Jimmy: Mom, I've got two red Vikings underground in my head and I've got to tell them to stop. Mom! Guess what they almost made me do!

Karen: What?
Jimmy: Pull your hair.

Karen: Jimmy, do you know how much we love you?
Jimmy: According to my calculations, 16 and 100.
Karen: That plus two million.

Jack

Jimmy: Oh, jeeze.
Me: Jimmy...
Jimmy: I only said the first part.

Jimmy and I were walking by a big house under construction.
Jimmy: Look!
Me: Yeah, that's something.
Jimmy: They're tearing it down.
Me: No, they're building it. See all the new wood and everything?
Jimmy: I've seen 'em tearing it, though.
Me: Why would they do that?
Jimmy: Becuuuze it's beeeen a milyyyun yeeooors.

Me: Jimmy, we love you whole lots.
Jimmy: When I punch you I still love you.

Jimmy: Do you wanna checkmark any days?
Me: OK. Um, Tuesday.
Jimmy: Which one of my fingers is Tuesday?
Me: This finger.
Jimmy: Thanks.
Jimmy left, and I had no idea what he was talking about.

Family

Jimmy scheduled a family meeting last night, because he wanted to talk about an experiment he's working on. But then he postponed the discussion, and he didn't want to say why. So right now, there's not much to report.

Extended family

Karen: You've got two grandmas.
Jimmy: I'll have 12 if Dad doesn't quiet down.

4.6 Easter

We headed down to St. Louis over the Easter weekend. Part of our mission was to pick up Ryan, because he was staying at Grandma Alice's during his spring break. Here's the story.

Preparation

Karen drove us in our minivan that looks like a space transport vehicle from a late 1970's syndicated sci-fi TV show that was canceled after one year. A minivan is great, because this close-knit family can be as far apart from each other as possible.

Grimbo was along with us, because he needs his daily medicine. So OK: We're now a family that travels with a cat.

On the way down, we rested at a rest stop, and I struck up a good conversation with this retired Michigan autoworker. We talked about his travels, how he was going to a Missouri campground...it was a pleasant conversation. Then Karen brought Grimbo around and handed him to me. The autoworker had a stunned expression.

Autoworker's look: Why didn't you tell me you're the kind of person who takes your cat everywhere?

Me, bumbling: We've...he's...the cat's sick! We have to bring him along.

The autoworker glared at me. We both knew I had entered a point of no return.

It's time to give you a description of the 300 miles between Chicago and St. Louis. I'll try to avoid saying, "There's a lot of farmland."

Hmm. There certainly is a lot of farmland. I'll get back to this later.

We ate at a truck stop, and I got a bowl of grits from the buffet. Karen watched me eat.

Karen: You might want to salt your grits. They taste good with salt.

Me: OK.

Karen: What butter did you put on them?

Me, pointing at the pads in front of me: This butter.

Karen: Oh. They've got honey butter at the buffet – that would taste good.

Me: Mm hm.

Karen: They still look good.

Me: Yeah, they are good.

Does it surprise you Karen ate half my grits?

Jimmy, Andy and I went into the trucker's men's room because Jimmy needed to, well. I waited near the sinks with Andy, and as one would expect those truckers on the toilet made a lot of loud gastrointestinal noises. Since Andy

imitates what he hears, he started making louder and longer “blllllllllrrrrrrrr!” sounds than any of the truckers. This silenced them for a moment. Some truckers must have thought, “Oh man, that poor guy’s got a problem.”

Back in the minivan...

Jimmy: Mom, I think we’re driving around in circles.

These highway trips always make me wonder: Are the tops of those 18-wheelers only a fraction of an inch away from the overpasses above them?

When Andy is handed a toy – like his big plastic keys – here’s the drill: First, he gives it a vigorous shake to get the feel of it. Then he scrutinizes the toy. Then he secures half of it with his feet (they’re close to his hands) and chews on it.

We drove to Collinsville, IL – Karen’s hometown, Martha/Fritz’s winter home, and part of Metro St. Louis.

Me: Jimmy, there’s the church your mommy and daddy got married in. You were up shining the stars, looking down on us.

Jimmy: Yeah! I thought, “What in the world?”

We had a fine visit with Grandma Martha and Grandpa Fritz.

Jimmy: Most of Grandma’s cooking is really good.

Then we traveled on to Grandma Alice’s home in the western St. Louis suburbs.

In St. Louis

Here are some random notes on Mom’s life:

Mom plays more bridge than ever. She went on a cruise last year and won first prize in their bridge tournament.

Mom is doing very well on her own, but I think she misses cleaning up after me.

Mom is also into genealogy. Two points about that:

~ She keyed our entire family tree into the computer. But currently we’re all deleted – she’s hoping to find us.

~ Some years ago, Mom ran out of ancestors on her side of the family, and she began researching my father’s side. Dad was happy to refute most of what Mom discovered.

Easter Sunday

Daylight savings time is either starting or stopping – don't ask me which. And here they had to do it to us on Easter, when we already have enough pressure.

Mom asked me to call the church's telephone recording to hear the start times of the Easter Mass(es). The priest gave the most peaceful voicemail recording I've ever heard.

Priest, quietly intoning: Easter Mass is at seven o'clock, eight thirty, ten o'clock and noon.

Me: Yes, Father.

We pulled up to the church and I dropped everyone off...but there were no parking spaces anywhere. I take that back – there were spots in front of the priests' garage – sacred asphalt. I was reminded of Mom's other priest friend and the sign over his garage-near-the-church: "Thou Shalt Not Park Here." ...

These priests had no such sign, so I took the forbidden space. Ten minutes later, I looked over there, and six other cars had joined mine. I had led them astray.

Afterwards...

Me: Ryan, what were they talking about in church?

Ryan: Easter Sunday, what else?

Doug, Peggy and Eva came over to Mom's for an Easter visit. Grandma loves to buy Eva pretty clothes, and Uncle Al pawns them.

Doug and I went on an errand together.

Me: [Five minute summary of my life and career.]

Doug: I'm sorry – I wasn't listening.

I called friend Frank Dinty while in town. I hadn't talked to Frank in some years, though we have e-mailed a lot. He recognized me immediately.

Me: I was hoping my voice had changed.

Frank: I think it's gotten higher.

Fact about Frank: He can summarize all of the plots to this series of teen horror pics. One time he went through all of them with me, and it took about an hour.

Frank: ...so the guy was dead in the swamp, but then this gal freed him with her psychic powers – that started part seven.

I was riveted through the whole saga. What does *War and Peace* have on this?

Monday

During his week there, Ryan went over to Uncle Doug's and saw a TV concert by a new rock band.

Me: Did you like seeing Brilliuntz?

Ryan: Yeah. They have really cool music you can actually understand, and you don't have to have someone translate it.

Me: Who's the coolest guy in Brilliuntz?

Ryan: Musk.

Me: Musk?

Ryan: It's just his name. It's his European name.

We thanked Mom for everything and headed home.

Ryan, a few months later: I remember that trip coming back from Grandma's. I had to watch Grimbo and make sure his medicine stayed cold. You guys should've gotten more ice when we stopped, because it started to melt.

4.7 Housework

Ryan

Ryan: Dad, this garbage is totally full. Can you take it out?

Ryan, coming into the house: Nan, you cleaned my room?!?

Karen: Yes, go look.

He opened up the door.

Ryan: Accchh!

Jimmy

Jimmy: I can't clean my room because it's too messy.

Andy

Andy threw up on a big blanket. I took it downstairs, washed and dried it. I brought it back up, and man did it smell – a combination of vomit and laundry detergent. Ohhh: I had put it in the washing machine but forgot to turn the machine on. But I did remember to dry it.

Jack

I had to 1) take a basket of dirty clothes to the basement, then 2) drive to a store. I drove off, got a few miles away, looked at the passenger seat, and there sat the basket of dirty clothes.

I'm weak at making a bed. Karen can give a bed that tight flatness, but mine looks like the scale model of a WWI battle site.

Family

Our house would be easier to keep clean if none of us lived in it.

In almost no time, our house can look like a natural disaster. It's clean in the morning, and by nightfall, we qualify for federal relief.

We buy these economy refill bottles of detergent, and we're supposed to pour that liquid into our original bottles. Like we'd ever go to that trouble.

4.8 Ryan's cast

Some weeks ago, Ryan fractured his left forearm while out with his friends on the playground. It had just started raining and he went down the slide too fast. We're all relieved it wasn't worse, and he's on the mend.

Al, via e-mail: Ryan should be glad he's not living during the time of King Richard III. Richard broke his arm and it was withered the rest of his life.

I took Ryan to the doctor to have his cast changed from a full-arm one to a forearm-only one.

At 11:45 am, I picked up Ryan from school and we drove down to the hospital. We walked through their "Pardon our dust, we're remodeling to serve you better" area. Hospitals always act like their remodeling is temporary, but they're constantly under construction.

We sat in the waiting area until Ryan's name was called. There were a lot of personnel attending to us, and that was excellent. It was hard for me to tell what smock represented what role. I think we had...

- 1) The man who cut and put on the cast.
- 2) The resident who...resides.
- 3) The young "I'm a doctor" doctor.
- 4) The older, wiser doctor. He happened to mention that he's almost 40. That means I still have four years to match his income level.

The cast-man took a hand-held electric saw and expertly cut right through that plaster thing, and he pulled it off.

Ryan: My arm! I haven't seen it for so long. Oh, my ar-har-har-harm.

Happily, Ryan could move his arm, and our medical congregation said it was coming along fine. Understandably, Ryan's hand was very dirty near where the cast ended.

Doctor: We're going to put on the new cast – why don't you wash that hand off.

Ryan: Eh, I don't need to.

Me: Yes he does.

It was time to put on the gauze wrapping.

Doctor: How about pink gauze?

Ryan: No way! Do I even need a cast?

He got the blue gauze, and he'll wear the forearm cast for three weeks.

We went to the Stackers fast-food restaurant inside the hospital. A big-sized kid's meal and a large diet cola cost \$6.40. Sheez.

Ryan: I think I'm the world's hungriest kid.

Me: So, you got your cast off.

Ryan: Yeah. They used a chainsaw.

4.9 School

Ryan

Ryan and Jimmy talked about a girl at Jimmy's school.

Ryan: She sits next to you? Uh oh, I know what that means. That means she's going to get a crush on you. Believe me, I know a lot about women. She'll get a secret crush, and she won't tell you about it until you're older. And for you that's going to be in 11 years. ...

Ryan then turned to the subject of dating. He said a date occurs when a boy goes to a girl's house, and he's done that.

Me: We never called that dating when I was a kid. We called it "going together." And believe me, nobody ever went with me.

Ryan: I can see why. You're a computer geek, and girls don't go for that.

Ryan: I can't do my book report. I've got to go to bed. I need my health. A book report, that's one thing. But my life – I've only got one life.

Ryan: I don't like fractions anymore.

Karen: Why?

Ryan: I thought 3/4s was the only one.

Ryan told me the kids got up and talked about their fathers.

Ryan: I said, "My Dad is the weirdest guy I know."

Ryan: In science today they brought in all the parts of a cow.

Me: Ooh, what did you think?

Ryan: We hid under our desks the whole time.

Karen asked me to get Ryan a present so he could give it to his teacher. We were at the supermarket together.

Ryan: This is embarrassing. None of the other kids are going to give presents.

Me: Let's discuss this. ...

We negotiated and settled on just giving his teacher a card. But this morning, Ryan was trying to back out of the deal

Ryan: Just to let you know? I might not get a chance to give it to her, because we've got a short day.

Me: Just put it on her desk. That'll be fine.

Ryan: No wait, you see Dad? We're gonna be in the auditorium the whole day.

Me: And you can't give it to her there?

Ryan: No way!

Me: Then put it under the door to her classroom. She'll get it.

Ryan: No Dad, they won't let us upstairs, I'm telling you. And besides, someone else might pick it up.

Me: Here – take my pen and write her name on the envelope. Ask permission to go up to her room. If you’ve got to give the card to anyone else, they’ll give it to her.

Ryan: Do you have a stamp? I’ll mail it.

Jimmy: Ryan, I just counted to 79. You can’t count that high.

Ryan: Oh man, I can count a million times higher than that. One, two, three–

Me: We believe you.

Ryan: Ergh! I hate all the homework I get.

Jimmy: I’ll have homework too, Ryan.

Ryan: In kindergarten? You’ll just have to bring in a leaf.

Ryan: Can we move the toy chest out of my room?

Me: What does your Nan say?

Ryan: She says OK.

Me: Good.

Ryan: When can we move it?

Me: Tonight.

Ryan: OK. What time is it?

Me: Um, 6:00.

Ryan: Is that night?

Me: It’s more like evening.

Ryan: Close enough. Can we move the toy chest?

Me: In a little bit.

Ryan: When’s a little bit?

Me: In ten minutes.

Ryan: Can you tell me when it’s 10 minutes?

Jimmy: Ryan, are you learning about the Silver War?

Me: Um, it’s Civil War.

Ryan: No, it’s the Sybil War. They named it after a guy’s wife.

Jimmy

Jimmy and his friend got a time-out at school because they called a classmate “Baby.” When I asked Jimmy about this he grew terribly embarrassed.

Jimmy: Don’t talk about that!

Jimmy told me that tonight, he secretly dug into his next day’s lunch and took one of his cookies from his lunch bag. That little schemer!

Me: What did you do in school today?

Jimmy: I’m not telling you.

We were supplying the snacks every day last week at Jimmy's school, so I kept loading Jimmy down like a pack mule. I put a weighty book bag on him this morning.

Jimmy: Ohhh, what is it this time?

Me: Pretzels.

Jimmy: Pretzels! Ohhh, my aching back.

Me to Jimmy: What are you working on at school?

Jimmy: Sevens.

Me: Those are easy to draw.

Jimmy: Eights are easy to draw.

Me: Why?

Jimmy: It's just two circles.

Me: What's hard to draw?

Jimmy: Zeroes.

Jimmy was in Sunday school, and he made a paper balloon for his Grandpa up in heaven.

Me: Jimmy, time to get up, go to school.

Jimmy: I quit school.

Me: What did you do at school today?

Jimmy: We pretended. Tommy played circus master, but he lost his job.

Jack

I'm grateful you and Dad spent so much getting me a higher education, because telemarketers call offering me special credit cards on behalf of my college.

Self-improvement classes would be better if I just paid the money and didn't have to attend.

I'm glad you had a topnotch time at your high school reunion. My school won't hold that for some years, because so many of my classmates are still in prison.

After school, I let Jimmy get a cherry ice cream. This was a big mistake, because Jimmy's school uniform shirt is white.

Me, panicky: Jimmy, just wipe your hands on my shirt. Watch out! ...

Luckily, nothing happened. Then we got home and he washed his face, and this diluted cherry mess flowed onto his white shirt.

4.10 St. Louis profile: Land

Introduction

What is it like in St. Louis? I grew up in the “Gateway to the West,” and even though I moved away to Chicago (north, not west), here’s a hokey write-up on a great and greatly underrated city.

St. Louis is one primary color: red. Because of all the red clay in the region, the bricks on buildings are every shade of red: dark red, rich red, red-red, etc. When you include the baseball Cardinals, St. Louis is the reddest city west of Mars.

St. Louis is a, “Hmm, I didn’t know that” town. The St. Louis area is where...
~ Corvettes were built! From the mid 1950s to the early 1980s, they were made exclusively in St. Louis.

~ a real exorcism took place...in the late 1940s. It was the inspiration for a popular novel on the subject.

~ Ulysses S. Grant owned a farm.

~ there’s the largest brewery in the country. (OK, you might have known that.) Drive by this giant distillery, and there’s a distinct and pleasant smell.

~ a number of international shoe companies operate.

~ ice cream cones were invented...at the 1904 World’s Fair.

Many idiotic outsiders make cracks about St. Louis, because they need to feel better than something. St. Louis provides an easy target, since it spends little time bragging about itself. But the secret is: The Gateway City is a very enjoyable place. It’s large enough to have attractive attractions, and small enough to reach them in less than 30 minutes.

Wisely, in the early ’80s, St. Louis stopped worrying about being listed as one of the 20 largest cities in America, and concentrated on becoming one the most enjoyable midsize cities – great for conventions. In other words, they left the bottom of one list and are earning their way to the top of another.

Dimensions

Why does St. Louis exist? Because it’s where the big Missouri River merges with the bigger Mississippi River, and it creates a huger Mississippi River. Since water traffic was all the rage before the railroads came along, this confluence (fancy word) formed the need for a trading town – where stuff coming from one way could be exchanged with wares from another. If items from the same far-away origin were exchanged in St. Louis, everyone laughed...in that 1770s way.

Regarding the “Gateway to the West” designation: St. Louis was the jumping off point for 1840s wagon trains going to Oregon and the remaining west.

St. Louis has a lot of rolling hills, because it's logical to have them around a river.

River: Where the heck am I gonna go? Oh, I'll just flow in between these hills. Don't ask me why rivers exist in flat areas.

A map of St. Louis is easy to draw:

The metro area is all around here: Y

Most of my family now lives out west on the Missouri side: ~ Y

Karen grew up in the northeast on the Illinois side: Y'

St. Louis is the northernmost southern city in the nation. In STL, the country folks and the city slickers barely put up with each other. Occasionally, a young city-type will fall in love with a young country-type. They'll have a Romeo and Juliet type romance, but luckily, it won't end like the play.

TV news people call the area the Bi-State region and Metro St. Louis, but people never use those terms. "St. Louis" covers it all.

One neighborhood is called Dogtown.

Arch

If someone only knows one thing about St. Louis, it's the Arch. Here are some Archish things.

Under the Arch, there's a big underground museum, and they show a movie about how the landmark was made.

The Arch is go-up-innable. This egg-shaped elevator ratchets you up to the top, where there are long windows and views of the river and city. The windows are small, because mega-tons of pressure push the legs against each other.

Around the Arch, there's a large park, and every July 4th America's Biggest Birthday Party is thrown there. It's as if the founding fathers wanted to see hundreds of drunken St. Louisans with no shirts on.

Riverfront

Along the shore, there are gambling riverboats, helicopters, and brick-paved riverbanks. In fact, bricks are used to make up a whole mini-town right off the river. ...

It's called Laclede's Landing, and while it used to consist of 19th century factories and businesses, it's now mostly bars and restaurants. STL was one of the first cities to clean up their brick buildings and turn them into a fetching tourist attraction. Rehabbers tore the asphalt off the streets, cleaned up the cobblestones underneath, and now cars have a bumpy ride that's more vertical than horizontal.

Going into the more businesslike downtown, St. Louis has a modern art structure that takes up a city block. It's a triangle made out of 10-foot high iron walls. The city has a long-standing tradition: After baseball games, hundreds of men relieve themselves on this sculpture.

Roads

In the 1800s, people laid down winding roads that went over a lot of hills and out to farms and smaller towns. But now, there are thousands of houses in those areas, and there are thousands of cars crammed onto those old roads.

A road certainly can go in a numerous directions. One is even called Big Bend – a total admission.

St. Louis has cool names for streets, like Kingshighway, Natural Bridge Road, and Lindbergh. Then again, there's Skinker.

Downtown St. Louis streets are named after trees. There's Pine, Chestnut, Locust, etc. They got the idea from Philadelphia.

Route 66 went through St. Louis, and the roads are still right there. They aren't old highways – they're wide streets with stoplights and lots of retail.

Here's a typical St. Louis problem: Broadway is a big, wide street. However, in a weird spot, someone put up a stop sign. It's not there for a cross street, but it serves a small side street that's used by maybe 10 cars a day. It's obvious some political jerk once lived on the side street and wanted an easy left turn onto Broadway. Now, Alderman Jerkbag is gone, but the stop sign remains.

The River Road

Here is the greatest thing the world should know about the St. Louis area but doesn't: There's a 15-mile River Road that, true to its name, runs along the Mississippi River on the Illinois side. It starts in a "just northeast of St. Louis" town called Alton, IL – where my mother grew up. Unfortunately, in the early 1980s the River Road lost its two best tour guides: my Alton grandparents.

Here's an overview map of the River Road...looking north:

WWW H B
WWW H B
WWW H B

W: Mississippi River

H: Four-lane highway

B: Bluffs, though the B's should be turned the other way

River side

Near Alton, there's a dam on the Mississippi, and this leaves the water lake-like – very wide and non-rushing-river-ish. There's plenty of boating going on. Down away after the dam, there's a statued tribute to Lewis & Clark, but it has that ugly Soviet statue style. (Meriwether and William were caught up in the red scare but were eventually cleared.) Thank goodness it floods out occasionally.

Along the shore, these long, flat metal barges are all lined up. They never seem in much of a hurry.

Sailor: Captain, that barge has been sitting here since 1977.

Captain: We'd better get it moving.

Across the water are islands with “duck blinds” – plywood shack hangouts where hunters freeze their behinds off.

On the shore there are homes put way up on stilts. They're trying to stay dry during the every-100-year floods that come every five years. After one flood, this man wrote the local newspaper, “Did 100 years pass already?”

Land side

(not “landslide” – don't say that near bluffs)

The River Road itself moves at 55 mph then slows through some small towns. Each lays claim to a locally known restaurant or bait shop. Don't confuse them like I did.

You'll see a lot of 90-foot tall bluffs in a drive along the River Road.
Quick notes:

- ~ Houses sit on top of and set into the bluffs.
- ~ They have caves with bats.
- ~ All along the bluffs, there are more legends and stories than anyone can handle.
- ~ There's a small college that's so hidden many of the students can't find it...and are expelled.

Pere Marquette State Park

A wooded park is off the River Road. Doug and I went camping for the last time there with Dad. I'm not saying that somberly, because we had a fine adventure. We stayed close enough to the lodge that we could walk there to eat whatever we needed. My Dad loved to camp, but he loved conveniences just as much.

Homes

In St. Louis, you get more house and land for your money. Many people go 45 minutes outside town and buy 15 acres...just so they can yell, "Get off my property!"

Some older houses have crosses set into the brickwork.

Karen observed that the rolling hills give the city a terraced effect. When you're on the expressway, you can look off and see rows of homes on different levels. Home buyers never have to leave the highway.

Places

St. Louis has...

~ a major new ice arena, but the contractor neglected to estimate that the building would need an ice rink...and they had to re-estimate.

~ a prison called Gumbo.

5. May

5.1 Timeline

School productions

I went to two spring concerts – one for each of the older boys. At these productions, I see a lot of the preparations made with the kids – rounding them up, making last-minute decisions, etc. It's a big part of the experience.

At Ryan's concert, he waited in line to go on stage, and he introduced me to another kid.

Ryan: This is my geeky dad.

I could see that Ryan gets along well with his classmates, because they do the following to each other:

~ make side karate kicks ("ee yah!").

~ leap onto backs.

~ mess up hair.

If these were allowed in adulthood, it would make life considerably more interesting.

Me: Jimmy, you have a concert tonight.

Jimmy: Tonight? Uh oh.

Me: Why?

Jimmy: Nothing. I just wanted to say, "Uh oh."

Overall assessment:

The concerts went just fine. The biggest benefit is seeing my kids not watching TV.

Renting a car

My car was getting fixed, so I rented a used car – a big four-door junker – a "stale-cigarette-smellmobile." Jimmy climbed inside and laid down inside that flat area that's under the back window and over the back seat. Every five-year-old loves that spot.

Jimmy: Did we buy this car?

Me: No, it's a rental car. That means –

Jimmy: I know what that is.

Me: Great. What is renting?

Jimmy: Um, I know what renting does, but I don't know what it is.

Friend Sid Flourney (owner of two German sports cars) couldn't believe a person would willingly rent a junker car.

Sid: How does that whole thing work?

Me: Look, I can't let you drive it.
Sid: Don't worry. Does the car actually go?
Me: Yes. Are you gonna rent one?
Sid: Is there a waiting list?

During this time my regular car got fixed, but not in the animal way. The whole family drove down to pick it up.

Jimmy: I don't wanna go. I'm gonna miss my TV show.
Ryan: Jim, TV is a little thing. Don't worry about it.
Jimmy: Quiiiiiet! Ryan, I don't wanna hear another peep out of you. And don't even say "but."
Ryan: But, but, but.

Karen and Ryan were talking about her workplace – the tall building with two long white radio antennas.
Karen: There's where I work, Jimmy.
Jimmy: The one with the horns on top?

We had a short amount of silence in the car.
Karen: I'm so happy my roses are really coming in well this year.
I report this to show that Karen is different from me, because under no circumstances would my mind wander to roses.

Finally, we picked up my repaired car, everything worked out fine.

Grimbo update

How's Grimbo? I'm glad to report he's back to his old self, and he rarely talks about those difficult past months. The best news is that he no longer needs his daily medicine.

However, I'm having problems with his nutritional cat food. First, it tastes terrible. Second, it comes in this giant bag – huge, like a feed sack you'd see on a horse ranch. Two notes about this:

1. The mega-bag sits right inside our pantry, and because the earth spins so quickly, the bag slumps into the door's path. Then, however carefully I open the pantry door, I hit the bag, and it takes a spectacular fall, dumping thousands of pellets onto the floor.

2. It's hard to pour the food from this huge sack. The thing is under my arm, I tilt it forward, and I can't see the bowl that's below and in front of me. So, I'll overshoot the drop zone. Next to the empty bowl, I create a miniature of Mt. Kilimanjaro.

Mother's Day

The Saturday night before...

I went into the grocery store, got a little hand basket, and went to pick up some last minute Mom-centric items. It was "prior to Mom's Day pandemonium" in this place. Crowds were...

- ~ buying cards
- ~ picking up flowers
- ~ throwing stuff everywhere.

One lady was exclaiming that someone took her shopping cart. Fine. I got flowers and cards and checked them out. Finally, I wheeled my shopping cart to the car.

I thought: Wasn't I using a hand basket? ...Oh! I'm the one who stole that lady's cart.

I trust that Brother Al will join you in church tomorrow, but when Al steps in there his feet get hot.

The Big Sunday

Happy Mother's Day! You're the best Mom anyone could have.

The following Monday

Last night we took Karen/Mommy/Nan out to dinner. Man, was traffic slow. It didn't help that along the route, every billboard had the same ad for this ugly male syndicated TV judge.

We went to a row of restaurants on the west side. Some decades ago, a lot of these eating establishments (or their predecessors) moved here from the near south side, because a university took their land. This is a story of Chicago: Something big moves in, and entire groups settle together elsewhere.

5.2 Andy at 10 months

Crawling

Andy is now crawling – regular crawling, and with purpose. If he wants something, he'll scramble over to it. Since he's become so mobile, our lives have changed significantly. In a nutshell, he's in a nutshell. We've enclosed the baby inside a big living room area. Andy is happy to putt around in there and throw toys at us.

Three crawling stories:

1. Andy scooted along fast but was going toward the wall. I reached down, turned him around the other way, and he kept going like nothing happened.
2. He will crawl into corners and get stuck there – much like a big battery operated toy. I turn him around and he's back crawling again.
3. When Andy crawls by, I'll mischievously slip my foot underneath his chest and hold him up a little. He continues to crawl in place and doesn't change his happy expression.

Standing

Andy just started holding himself up against furniture – another achievement! While this is wonderful, it increases his grab zone. We have to move things so high that I can't reach them.

If I stand Andy up looking at me, then I slowly take my hands away, he'll stay there on his own for about five seconds. He sways randomly about five degrees. Andy's look: What the heck am I doing?

Notably, Andy doesn't perform the full body on-the-diaper fall – “timbrrr!” He eases down to meet the carpet.

5.3 Circle update

Movie premiere

I talked with friend David Daniels. Dave is such a fan of this 1970s sci-fi movie series he's taking vacation time around the upcoming Part 4 (which they call Part 1) premiere. Over the years, I've thrown him a lot of questions about this serial, and he's been up on everything. Dave has never replied, "You know, that aspect of the series never interested me much." ...

I asked David how he would get impossible-to-get tickets to the premiere. Dave said his parents were standing in line for him.

Baseball game

Friends Joe and Jennifer Anderson invited Karen and me to a baseball game. Since our marriage works in shifts, only I could go. Here's the whole story:

Joe and Jennifer had a recent climatological drama. Joe's Mom lives in Florida, and the couple flew down to help her move. The weather threw everything it could at them, but son and daughter-in-law made it to Joe's Mom and got the job done. Reminds me how I let the movers take care of you.

They live in a unique loft space in a big old building near the west side of the Loop. There, function follows form, because the building used to be a multi-story industrial bakery, and the residences are creatively laid out within existing walls.

I walk into their main area, and the ceiling is about 35 feet up. Ascending on the right are two mezzanines (defined: a partial story between two main stories of a building). One story is a bedroom and the other is an office. Looking left, their living room is in a former oven. ...

Jennifer is well organized. For example, she has these containery containers for small umbrellas and baseball hats. Like all very-together people, she wants to do more.

Jennifer: Oh, I need a hat for our team. I've got plenty of Kansas City hats. We'll have to get one at the park.

We went to the ballpark and mostly sat through a rainout. This was my kind of ballgame! We could sit together and talk, and not be distracted by an important play on the field.

I took the challenge of saying five things about Joe neither of them had thought of in years. It was easy, because Joe is always deeply immersed in a work-related drama. For example, in the 1980s, he became sales manager at a company where the president spent most of his time 1) watching his house get

constructed, and 2) going on pleasure trips. The chief operating officer's main job was taking the president to the airport.

Quick side note: Joe is the wealthiest person I know...in frequent flyer miles. He is a "points tycoon."

Since Joe and Jennifer invited me to the game, it was proper for me to buy them drinks and food. But I didn't think of this early on, and I showed up with only \$4.00. That wouldn't go far at the ballpark. Perhaps you're asking, "Why not go to the cash machine there?" Unfortunately, there was even less money in my checking account. I considered asking Joe to loan me \$30 so I could pay for things, but that defeated the purpose. ...

Resolution: I snuck off and found a machine that accepted credit cards...and charged 30 cents on the dollar.

5.4 Park

The park is a big part of our lives together, and we're looking forward to you joining us when you come up in a few weeks. So you're prepared, here's a write-up on what usually happens.

Beginning

It starts with Jimmy and Ryan yelling that they want to go to the park. Andy pretty much stays home with his Mom, because we don't want him getting stepped on.

Travel

The park is about half a mile away – a good walk. But we like it more than closer parks, because it doesn't have dog droppings everywhere. To get there, we run races down the sidewalk. Ryan always wins, and his job is to block Jimmy from going into the street. Jimmy comes in second, and let's not talk about who's last.

Jimmy, suddenly stopping: My leg hurts. And my foot. Actually, just my foot.

Jimmy: Where's that pigeon going?

Me: I don't know.

Jimmy: I think he's going to the park, too.

Arrival

This park is the size of a home lot – like 30 feet wide and 120 feet long – but instead of a three-flat going in, it got swings and wood chips.

We call it Dorothy's Park, because it's close to friend Dorothy P. Wood's home. You'll recall she was kind enough to take care of Dad when he was here. It's appropriate to name a park after our friend, because she's a nature lover in our concrete city. Dorothy...

~ identifies different birds in the neighborhood. Before Dorothy came along, I didn't know Chicago had birds.

~ examines every rose. Dorothy says they each smell a little different.

~ finds pieces of wood for crafts.

~ watches the moon. Aside from the NASA folks, Dorothy is the moon's closest friend.

Jimmy: Look at that squirrel – he's gathering nuts for the winter. No, wait – he's just snacking.

Swings

The boys get on this modern tire swing. It's a tire-like black plastic thing, and it lays horizontally. Three chains extend from it and connect at one spot at the top. Ryan and Jimmy sit in it, and they receive my super-mega spinout. As any

physics professor would explain, their spinning narrows into a smaller circle, and thus it goes faster, then faster.

Ryan, afterward: Trust me, I don't feel so good.

When we go out on the regular swing set, I underdog the kids. Essentially, this is a big push.

Jimmy, angry: Dad, you gave me a super underdog, and I wanted a regular one.

Tag

Ryan's rules for tag are advantages he freely gives himself. Whenever he wants, he can...

~ call a timeout for himself.

~ declare any place a "safety zone."

~ have his fingers crossed, so even if he's tagged he's OK. ...

Whenever I make some progress, new rules pop up.

I was chasing Ryan. He barely got into the safety zone (swing set) then collapsed.

Me: You made it.

Ryan: Yeah, and there's not much I can do with a broken leg.

Me: You broke your leg?

Ryan: Yeah, yesterday on the monkey bars. I also think I unattached my neck.

Jimmy wanted us to play tag, and it was his job to determine who was it. We each put a foot in.

Jimmy: Bubblegum, bubblegum in a dish. How many pieces do you wish?

Me: Five.

Jimmy: Dad's it! You're a ninny pants!

Ryan ran off.

Me: Hold it!

I chased after them.

Ryan played tag with this other kid, and the kid caught Ryan. (I could have told the boy this would be a problem, because Ryan doesn't like getting tagged.) Once nabbed, Ryan took a theatrical fall to the ground, and then laid stunned and victimized for a long moment.

Ryan, affronted: You tagged me way too hard! When you tag, you're not supposed to hit like that.

Jimmy: Are we going to wrestle in the park?

Me: I think we're going to chase, 'cause we can't wrestle in the park.

Jimmy: I mean wrestle-chase.

Andy

Later in the summer, Baby Andy went with us to the park – his first trip ever. He sat on the tire swing with his brothers and they posed – even though I didn't have a camera. That was one happy baby – he loves doing new big-kid stuff with his brothers.

Andy enjoyed the little baby park swing – the one that's a bucket with leg holes. As I pushed, he put a large smile on his face.

Andy: Aaoohgh.

He firmly gripped the sidebars, sat upright, and showed better posture than I do.

Andy: Brrrrth.

I was very proud of him. He'll enjoy thousands of parks in his long life.

Games

We played Three Billy Goats Gruff. I was the Troll, and Andy played my helper – Troll Jr.

Me: Who tramps over my bridge?

Jimmy: It's me.

Me: I'm gonna get you.

Jimmy: Wait for my bigger brother to come.

Me: But I'm gonna get you.

Jimmy: Dad! That's not the way you say it. You're supposed to say, "Very well then."

Me: Very well then.

Jimmy: Wait 'til I'm a goat again.

I'm terrible at throwing a ball, and Ryan quickly noticed this.

Ryan: Oh, lame throw, Dad!

Decades ago, my brothers – your other sons – gave me plenty of trouble about my weak throwing ability. Then there was a 20-year lull, and now Ryan has brought it all back again.

Al: Ryan, when your Dad was young, we said he threw like a girl. Now that he's older, we say he throws like a lady.

Me: Great catch, Ryan!

Ryan: Yeah! That was something you told me – keep my eye on the ball.

Me: I taught you something about baseball?

Ryan, sitting atop the monkey bars: Dad, you never listen to me.

Me: Why don't you become the Dad then.

Ryan: OK, I will. Could you teach me how to drive, ex-Dad?

Me: No.

Ryan: Jim, into the corner!

Jimmy: No way.

Me: Dad, can I have? Can I have? Can I have?

Ryan: Jack, you're grounded.

Jimmy: Ryan, you're not Dad, you're a poo-poo brain.
Ryan: Leave me alone 'til I figure this out.

Ryan dunked his head into the water fountain.
Jimmy: Ryan, don't wash your hair.

Jimmy: Ryan, what's 100 x 100?
Ryan: A million?
I thought: How much is it? I'm supposed to know that.

Here's how Jimmy climbs a slide: He lies on the flat metal, and instead of grabbing onto the sides, he flops upwardly and doesn't make progress.

Home

After the park, we're tired, so there are no races back home. The boys focus on their drinks and snacks, and we talk about things like cartoon trivia.

One time we were having fun at the park, and Ryan intuitively turned his head upward.

Ryan: Dad...look at the sky – it's a weird orange.

Me, following Ryan's direction: Uh oh. We've gotta get home.

We started running. The winds kicked up, and the trees showered these little green nuts on us. Then the real rain started, and...we got drenched, but we made it. The storm was so bad, the electricity went out, and Karen looked for candles.

Ryan: Dad, are we going back to the park?

5.5 Language

Ryan

Jimmy: I brung my lunch.

Ryan: It's brang.

Jimmy: What's the scariest place ever?

Ryan: Transylvania. People translate things there.

Ryan carried two MonstaSquad figures in his pocket.

Ryan: They're called Scalazon and Spackback. Actually, it's like Theusback, but I can't pronounce that name so I call him Spackback.

Jimmy

Jimmy: Dad, I just said Jesus.

Me: You shouldn't say that.

Jimmy: I meant Jesus with the Bible.

Jimmy: Have you heard of Mark Jenson?

Me: Matt who?

Jimmy: It's Mark, not Matt. Use the cursive k.

Jimmy: Someone on the cartoon said "jeez," and that's not good.

Me: That's right. What do you say instead?

Jimmy: I say, "Oh man."

Me: Sometimes you say, "Dang it."

Jimmy: And I say, "Fiddlesticks."

Andy

Andy: Rah rigs.

Ryan: Andy talked! He said, "Hey ribs."

5.6 Memorial Day weekend

Here's a write-up on our Memorial Day weekend trip to St. Louis.

5/29 Saturday

On the drive down to St. Louis...

Since Grimbo no longer needs his daily medicine, we're no longer a family that travels with a cat. Friend Marco stayed at our house over the holiday and took care of Grimbo. Marco is a security guard, and who better to take care of the home? He even did rounds upstairs and downstairs. I'm not kidding.

Trips down to St. Louis are uneventful, so here's a story to pass the time. About five years ago, I was at a gas station somewhere along the route. I filled my car up, went into the restroom and changed clothes. I came out, drove off, and ripped the gas nozzle away from the standup thing. I stopped. Gas was chugging out of the torn nozzle, and I was stricken – what to do? The attendant walked out and casually flipped a switch and stopped it.

Me: You want my phone number?

Attendant: No, we're fine.

I kindly gave him the torn off nozzle and resumed my trip.

We finally drove to St. Louis

Ryan: I see the Arch!

Jimmy: What? I don't even know what an Arch is.

Me: It's right there. What do you think of the Arch, Jimmy?

Jimmy: We're in New York?

We got to Grandma's house, greeted her, and had an impromptu celebration together.

Mom: Do you want to see this change of address card your brother sent out?

Me: Not really.

Mom: Well, I'm showing it to you anyway.

I checked Mom's stocks on the Internet for her.

Me: You were up today, Mom.

Mom, disappointed: Yes, but not by much.

She said it like I was responsible.

After the family retired, I went on one of the casino boats with brother Al. Any resemblance between this place and a boat is unintentional. The state has a "all casinos m bvvvvv

ccx

cc

[I'm sorry: The baby banged on my laptop.]

must float on water" requirement, but it doesn't look like a boat at all. It's shaped more like a shell. Anyway, Al tended to his horrible gambling addiction, and I watched TV with no sound on.

5/30 Sunday

Morning

Today we saw Doug and Peggy's new house. They have a nice place in Webster Groves, and I spent a lot of time trying to find things wrong with it.

Brother Doug's little daughter Eva saw a Siamese cat that wandered into their yard.

Eva: Doggy!

Doug then made it a point to show his daughter a nearby dog and explain the difference to her.

It's interesting to see Doug as a father. Twenty-three years ago, this guy practically lived at rock concerts, and now he's a total dad. I'd like to say we all grow up, but all those '70s bands are still on tour.

Al and I were sitting out back at Doug's house. Doug was mowing the lawn, and I thought Al was enjoying a side of life that didn't involve his usual poker chips and Tijuana.

Al, suddenly bursting out: Man, you guys are so domestic! What happened to you?

Peggy is carrying a happy baby inside her – and has been for five months. She said it's only fair for Doug to pick up and carry Eva.

Afternoon

We had a nice 40th birthday celebration for Al. The biggest problem with Al turning 40 is that I'll turn 40 in little over four years. It was similar when he became 30.

By tradition, Doug buys presents at the last minute. He went to the store, bought gifts for Al and some mints for himself. Doug gave the bag to Peggy, and she wrapped everything up. When Al opened his presents, there was an extra gift with a bow on it: Doug's 79-cent mints.

Right in the middle of Al's birthday-present-opening festivities...

Luke (Al's friend since childhood): Al, did you get your bets in?

Al: Oh. Hang on everyone, I'll be right back.

He drove off, and we had the opportunity to wait for him.

Evening

Doug, Al and I went on a real riverboat – this was right on the Mississippi. I sat down to play with a lot of hard-bitten poker players, we kibitzed, and they became like family to me. Unfortunately, I gambled away all the money Jimmy saved in his little wallet, but I'll pay it back.

They have a free buffet right in the poker room, so you can eat three-day-old somethings while you lose money. At the food counter, there were deep-fried "potato medallions" that could've passed for poker chips if the dealer was nearsighted. Also, a serving spoon was welded into the macaroni in cheese. Getting it out was like a B-movie version of King Arthur's sword in the rock.

Three Brackitt brothers sat at one poker table together, and surprisingly, we were the only remaining players for one particular hand. The pot grew to over \$28, and that impressed the whole room. It was too much for Doug's fragile nerves, so he dropped out – leaving Al and me.

Me: Al, if you raise me, I'll need to borrow more money from you to stay in the game.

Al: That's fine – I'll get it all back anyway.

Indeed. Al's straight beat my flush, so he won.

Afterward, we went to a quiet sports bar (I only like bars when they're near empty and have lots of TVs). Al flopped around like a fish out of water while waiting for his sports scores. Most of Al's team lost, so he went through all the stages of anger, denial, and, in his case, anger again.

5/31 Monday

We drove back home, and I got on the scale. I gained five pounds on the trip, so St. Louis was that much lighter.

5.7 Health

Ryan

Ryan: Wow, my hair's growing.

Me: What?

Ryan: Yeah, I felt it.

Ryan: You feel OK?

Me: Fine.

Ryan: You look terrible.

Ryan: Is there a gym around here?

Me: Hmm, a gymnasium.

Ryan: No, a gym.

Jimmy

Jimmy: I know why you hide the matches in the house.

Daddy: Why?

Jimmy: So Andy won't play with them.

Daddy: That's right. And so who else won't play with them?

Jimmy: Ryan.

Daddy: Yes, and who else?

Jimmy: No, hold it, stop. I know about matches, so I don't need to say me.

Jimmy: Under my armpit it smells like noodles.

Andy

I'll tissue Andy's nose then check his reaction. At best, he'll get a frustrated look, make a fast "wah," and that's it. At worst, Andy pauses, scrunches his face, and then screeeeeeaaaaams! I can't predict which extreme he'll go to.

Me: What makes you so big and strong?

Jimmy: Baby and me do our exercises. We flap our arms together.

Jimmy: Inside the baby's mouth it's really hot.

Me: Did you put your finger in there?

Jimmy: Yes, I tested it.

Karen

Me: Where's the baby's ointment?

Karen: It's somewhere.

Jack

I went to buy myself a new pair of glasses, and wowzie, they really tried to sell me a lot of extra stuff. They wanted...

- ~ \$40 for anti-glare.
 - ~ \$50 for insurance.
 - ~ \$30 for scratch resistance.
 - ~ \$30 to make the lenses thinner than usual.
- Wouldn't they reduce the lense width as a public service?

Someone needs to tell the drug companies the world has reached its limit on the amount of headache remedies. If a company markets a new pill, that's wonderful. But they'll have to stop production on an old one. The reason: All those choices make my headache worse. The truth is, I barely kept up with the ibuprofen/acetaminophen revolution, and naproxen is way ahead of me.

I'd like to see one health insurance claim get processed without a problem.

Talk

What's this? Now they're saying smoking might be bad for us.

I'm impressed with these workout products sold on infomercials. It's amazing they can conjure up 25 exercises for a three-dollar lump of plastic.

5.8 Chicago profile: Tone

Pre-note: There are no absolutes with humans. Everything I'm about to say regarding people should have an "In many cases" before it.

Work

Chicago is an "I gotta get to work" city. People understand they're expected to be more productive, and act accordingly.

Chicago is headquarters to a lot of familiar companies. Many make well-known items, and who'd have guessed they'd be here. For example, the #1 car wax is made in Chicago.

A lot is "just done that way" in Chicago. For example, most of the food manufacturers are located south and southwest. Thousands of South-siders work their entire careers in south-side food companies, live somewhere south, and that's how it is.

Chicago contains at least 25 major industries. Off the top of my head, there's...

- ~ advertising
- ~ associations
- ~ commodities trading
- ~ computers
- ~ construction
- ~ food
- ~ insurance
- ~ money
- ~ product manufacturing
- ~ telecom
- ~ transportation
- ~ wholesale/retail trade

There are even more "industry concentrations" as you go out to the suburbs.

A lady could specialize in selling insurance, work for eight different insurance companies over a career, and do it all right in the Chicago area. Why wouldn't she switch to, say, food product sales? Because the city is obsessed with industry experience! A company looking to hire will choose a lackluster candidate from the same industry over a star performer from another field.

Ironically, all this industry specialization makes Chicago a fairly small city. Many in the same field get to know each other.

Phil: Do you know So and So?

Kathy: Sure I know him! I worked with him 10 years ago at the XYZ Company. I'd be glad to call him for you. We're old friends.

Chicagoans are always sizing up and assessing. They scan a scene to make sure everything fits in correctly. If something is out of place, they question it.

The best worker in Chicago would be alert, savvy, confident and industrious.

Chicagoans make good use of their time. They multi-task. Talk to a Chicagoan and he'll be simultaneously...

- 1) listening to what you're saying
- 2) determining why listening to you is helping him
- 3) glancing the work in front of him
- 4) mentally solving some completely unrelated problem

Even if he says, "You have my undivided attention," you don't.

Weather

Quick notes:

- ~ Only Neptune has greater extremes of hot and cold temperatures.
- ~ I'm an authority on the effects of Chicago weather, because I'm always dressed wrong for it.
- ~ Chicagoans have better winter wardrobes than summer ones.
- ~ The wind goes out of its way to get me. It sneaks around corners.
- ~ It's bad to eat high-powered breath mints while walking in zero degrees.
- ~ Winter is tiring for Chicagoans. Warmer temps infuse life into everyone.

Why Chicago has fewer flies:

1. Apparently, our deep freezes kill the insect larvae (?) – the goo that wants to become a fly.
2. There's a lack of yards and woods. Flies have to walk on the streets, and they don't like it.

Significance

- ~ I'm an extra in a very long movie called Chicago.
- ~ It's not a big deal if the president comes into town.
- ~ Stories worthy of national news come out of this city.
- ~ Being here is an affirming experience.
- ~ If you tell people you live in Chicago, they know where that is.

A lot of different things go on at once, so the newspapers can usually blast good headlines. We have political corruption scandals that would be a huge deal in a smaller city, but here they're part of an ongoing swirl.

Hollywood celebrities come through Chicago every so often, and they usually don't act more important than the city.

Typical star on the local talk show: Oh, I love coming to Chicago. We always have a lot of fun when we're here.

Chicago produces most of those trailer trash national talk shows. Their guests keep our police busy.

There's history here

Chicago has so much history, the city doesn't know what to do with all of it. And there seems to be more every year. Note that the city was really big even in, like, 1905, so it's been something for a long time.

As much as Chicago projects a positive image, people around the world talk about Al Capone first.

If you're hooked on any aspect of American history after 1840, you'll find some interesting part of it in Chicago. The city always delivers on the past – it's worth a trip.

Vibrancy

Manhattan has Chicago beat for excitement, but Tokyo has the Big Apple whipped, so we shouldn't get too wrapped up in comparisons.

Chicago isn't sleepy, laid back or relaxed – it's always moving. If you have energy, you'll feel at home in Chicago. Walk to a busy intersection and you'll probably see...

- ~ buses
- ~ L tracks
- ~ pedestrians
- ~ drivers running red lights
- ~ stores
- ~ sandwich boards (triangular signs that set in front of shops and have luring messages)

The exception is the "corporate part of the Loop after dark," because that shuts down.

Access

If you're looking for something, you can probably find it in Chicago. There are millions of resources – and they're always less than an hour away.

People used to drive from all around to get items in Chicago. Two examples:

In the mid '70s, Dad went to Chicago and paid \$105 for a short wave radio. Today, that radio would be for sale in a St. Louis store and on many websites, but back then making the drive was a big deal.

In 1950, my Brace, Illinois grandparents (on my Dad's side...Brace is a small town in central Illinois) traveled two hours north to Chicago's Merchandise Mart and purchased blonde furniture. It was delivered to their home first by train, then by truck.

Travelers have layovers in Chicago.

People

Business

More than anything else, why does Chicago grow? Because for 150 years, it has attracted millions of the world's hardest-working people. The immigrants who arrive here have courage, energy and a drive to succeed. They make it, and most of their children pick up those industrious qualities.

Chicagoans...

~ are always looking for shortcuts – ways to streamline.

~ feel they understand the whole situation after they hear one minute's worth of information.

~ calculate non-stop. For example...

Wendell: What do you do for a living?

Alfred: I'm a tsdfkjjasdfk.

Wendell thinks: Hmm, a tsdfkjjasdfk.. That job pays him about \$50,000 a year.

Every male Chicagoan thinks he's smarter than the man he's talking to.

Immigrants

Karen: Chicago has little slices of the world.

The stories tell about huddled masses of immigrants, but they always have the latest mobile phones and video recorders.

Every four years, the world championship of soccer is played, and countless Chicagoans wear the jerseys of their home countries.

When folks move here, they generally live where people of their nationality have already settled. It makes sense: If I moved to Micronesia, I wouldn't know the first thing about their culture, so I'd plunk down where other Americans live. They'd recommend a good bank, doctor, etc. That same story is told millions of times over 150 years in Chicago. It's the reason we have a Ukrainian area, a Scandinavian area, and a Mexican area.

A lot of people have dialects. If I meet someone with a British accent, he's probably not faking it.

A lot of Chicagoans are from Michigan. Wisconsin and Indiana are closer, but I guess Michigan has a larger population.

Strangers

The amount of strangers is dizzying. I see these humans once and never again. Give me a laxative.

Chicagoans won't engage with strangers. If someone is doing something obviously different on the street (screaming, for example), Chicagoans don't flip out. They've 1) seen weirder things before, and 2) got better things to worry about.

Coupla more things

North Chicagoans won't go to a store or restaurant if it's good but too affordable. It has to be a little pricey.

Chicagoans make it a point to be nonchalant about everything. Two examples:

1

Man yelling: Zoo animals just escaped, and they're running up the street!
Chicagoan: That doesn't surprise me.

2

Man reading: "Flight delays are up 37% this year."
Chicagoan: [Half shrug]

96% of Chicagoans have a good heart – they'll do anything for you. The remaining 4% are spread out equally. It's untrue that some neighborhoods have more mean people. Being a Class A jerk (to use my Dad's term) takes a lot of effort, and most Chicagoans have better things to do.

The fussy folks

Too many people become uber-fastidious when they get success in Chicago. They...

- ~ feel they're much better than people who serve them.
- ~ look for opportunities to be offended.
- ~ say idiotic things like, "This is unacceptable."

Cabbies

I learn a lot from cab drivers, primarily because 1) they're usually from countries I'll never get to visit, and 2) they've had a lot of time to reflect about life. The educational experience is worth the price of cab fare – a good trade.

At least once, a cabbie has told me about...

- ~ the reasons he came to America.
- ~ the economic and political status of his home country.

- ~ the war he fought in.
- ~ differences between stereotypes and reality.
- ~ how he met his wife – here or back home.
- ~ the Chicago neighborhood he lives in.
- ~ his religion.
- ~ advantages to his culture.
- ~ what a particular world leader should do.

Cabbies know a lot about human interaction. One cabbie told me: “If a customer is angry with me, I make him laugh. People can never have two emotions at the same time.”

I talked with a cab driver from Nigeria. He said his family could get plenty of food and drink in his village back home, but they couldn’t afford clothing and other necessities. He wanted to get more out of life, so he brought his family to Chicago.

Thoughts about selected age groups:

Teens

A lot of 19-year-olds used to beg near us, but I have no sympathy for healthy teen panhandlers.

20s

There’s a lively 20-something population that immigrates to North Chicago. They usually come from 1) towns inside a 300 mile radius, and 2) countries two continents away. In all cases, they spend a lot of money at the bars.

50s

In the mega-money part of town, the older men have this successful, “I’m really wealthy” walk. It’s slower, but not in a lazy way. It’s in a, “I have it made and I don’t need to rush” way.

Clothes

I understand there’s an old clothes shop that will pay \$100+ for 1970s jeans in good shape, but I’ve never seen the place.

There was this small store that sold black t-shirts, black leather, black everything – and ceramic gargoyles. Over time, the store grew in popularity, quintupled its space, spawned new hard-edged shops, and now it’s the Goth mini-mall.

There’s a fashionable used clothing store that’s close to the unfashionable one. Obviously, the fash store buys from unfash, then sells at a jacked up price.

People show more freedom to wear different clothing styles.

There are a whole lot of dry cleaners. Our cleaner/tailor friend Fikret theorizes that the apartment dwellers have more spending money, and thus send their clothes out for cleaning. When a dry cleaner has a theory, I listen.

Generally, women don't wear the latest fashions. They prefer styles that were new three years ago and have stood the test of time.

Quick notes:

- ~ A lot of immigrants wear styles from their home countries.
- ~ There's very little urban cowboy going.
- ~ Guys live in branded sportswear.

Media

Newspapers

Chicagoans read a lot of newspapers. I don't know how this pertains, but the city doesn't charge tax on newspapers and magazines.

There are several good-sized free newspapers.

I would have thought this international city would be brimming with international newspaper shops, but I hardly ever see them. And this was true even before the Internet came along.

Radio

Chicago has traffic reports 24 hours a day, and it's smart to listen to them.

One DJ commuted between Chicago and Dallas every day. He did the morning shift here and the afternoon there.

The city is large enough to absorb multiple successful radio personalities. There are at least seven morning teams who have relatively safe jobs.

Other towns I've been in have a lot of syndicated junk airing on Sundays, and mercifully, Chicago doesn't do that. Live local humans work all over the dial overnight and on weekends. There's good late-night radio entertainment, because they have a big audience at that time.

The most commonly used line on Chicago sports radio is, "I think we'll make third place this year."

The upper parts of the AM dial sound more like short wave radio. There are a lot of foreign language stations, and every international store plays the station for their nationality. For example, a Polish bakery has Polish radio on in the background. What they're talking about, I don't know. They might be talking about me.

Some of the radio stations don't follow national canned formats put together by overrated consulting groups, but they actually think for themselves. Two examples:

1. At an AM station, the announcers read most of the commercials live, because it's more personalized and spontaneous.
2. An established FM rock station lets DJs decide which songs to play – something that's been unheard of for over 20 years. This station proves that radio doesn't need to be reduced to prepackaged shinola, and maybe that army of "experts" who over-think and group-think everything *is wrong*. (Can it be said?)

TV

Local TV is stronger. Production people make few mistakes, and on-air talent doesn't fumble around. It's apparent that workers are being paid a real wage to do it.

One TV show helps public school kids do their homework.

Chicago used to have an international broadcast channel. Each major nationality had their own hour. I'd watch a Korean soap opera and try to figure out the plot, which was no easy task. Then on Sunday night, they had wrestling – the universal language.

Billboards

Coming into town on Interstate 55, there are a lot of liquor billboards. They give visitors an interesting first impression.

The national advertisers create billboards specifically for Chicago, and usually it's some variation on "Windy City."

New York copywriter Fred: I have to create these billboards for Chicago.

Copywriter Mark: Why don't you do something with The Windy City? Wind. What can you do with wind...

~ There was a billboard for a gay/lesbian cruise line.

Entertainment

There's no way I can adequately discuss entertainment in Chicago, primarily because I'm a hermit. Instead, I'll tell you about an independent play Ryan, Jimmy and I went to.

I like independent theater! The cast and crew don't work for money, but – it seems to me – they want to improve their skills, move the audience, and catch a break. Many of these productions (and there are many) are performed in broken down 1890s storefront sites, and everything gets done for under \$200.

The location: Inside, a lot of plywood was used to make the stage and risers for the audience of 40. Their seats include 1970s kitchen chairs, a couch, folding chairs and lawn furniture.

The actors: Our being there meant a lot to the performers. They made eye contact with everyone, and they got more enthusiastic the more we laughed. Afterward, all the players stood in costume and shook hands with us as we left.

Summary: For entertainment, I recommend seeing a small production that's gotten strong reviews. It's an unforgettable experience.

A lot of TV shows and movies are shot in Chicago, and if you have a favorite, you can probably find the locations it was celluloided.

Another film was about that homerun king from the 1920s. This is something: They took the street around our L station and covered it with dirt. Then get this: They covered the post-1920s retail stores with molded plastic facades that made them look like early century banks and barber shops.

6. June

6.1 Timeline

I was really proud of Ryan the other day. We were out on the sidewalk, and we saw this family we knew. While we were talking, their four-year-old daughter got away on her bike. She was heading toward traffic – aghh!

Me: Ryan! Run and stop her!

Ryan ran his fastest speed, and he held up her bike about six feet from the intersection. Excellent! The family thanked him. Ryan is our hero.

Jimmy: Can you turn off the air conditioner?

Me: It is off.

Jimmy: Can you turn it on?

I went to Jimmy's preschool graduation tonight. He stood on the stage and used his rolled up diploma like a telescope.

During the ceremony, a teacher had to shush friend Lou Morgan and me. I promise – it was all his fault.

I couldn't use the remote because Grimbo was lying in front of the VCR. He was blocking my phaser action. At one time, I would have thrown a pillow at Grimbo, but we're all getting older.

For our eighth wedding anniversary, we went out to eat with longtime partners Evan and Sebastian. They're artists, and they live imaginative lives in a city that wants them to be blah. For instance, they hand-make three-dimensional Christmas cards. In return, they receive one of my "50 for \$3.99" holiday cards. ...

Sebastian and Evan also have an American friend who gave herself a British accent.

6.2 Andy at 11 months

Ryan was instructing Andy.
Ryan: Baby, come on. Try walking. It's an easier way to get around. Watch me.

Andy is now holding the bottle, and he learned to tilt it back.

Today, Gwen gave Andy his first French fry. He liked it.

Trip to the doctor

Andy was a little under the weather, so I took him to the pediatrician.

The baby and I sat in the waiting area, and there were a lot of magazines about how to be a parent. That's the last thing I want to read.

Andy behaved well for the doctor, and only got annoyed when she looked deep into his ears – understandable. It turns out Andy has an ear infection, and so he'll take a pink liquid for a while, and he'll be fine.

6.3 Circle update

Friends Sid and Elizabeth Flourney had me over to their nice home for an after-work visit. They're into listening to CDs in the house rather than running the TV constantly, so that was a different experience for me. They're also wine collectors. Sid uses those phrases like identifying the nose and bouquet. I used them too, and they were clearly impressed.

Here are a couple things about Sid:

He knows streets and traffic, and he keeps himself as traffic central for me. One morning, I was late for a meeting, and I called Sid from my cellular phone.

Me: I have to be in Lisle in 50 minutes.

Sid: Where are you now?

Me: I'm near my house.

Sid: Let me check the web.

Chicago has various online sources that tell traffic conditions.

Sid: OK. Don't take the Eisenhower. Get yourself down to North Avenue.

Me: But –

Sid: When you get to North, check your odometer. After you drive five miles, I'll tell you how to get to 88.

Me: I've never done that.

Sid: It's fine – you can do it!

And thanks to Sid, I got to Lisle in plenty of time.

Here's the best service Sid has ever performed: He was doing computer consulting work for a potato chip company, and he suggested they put more chips into the little bags.

6.4 Al Brackitt profile

Al...

- ~ was born close to 1960.
- ~ loves to gamble on most anything. Anything, actually.
- ~ studies the object of the game when playing pinball.
- ~ can draw a map showing all the US interstate highways.
- ~ prefers to eat cheese pizza, chicken, spaghetti, plain hamburgers...and not much else.
- ~ can explain all the US presidential elections, including who lost and why.
- ~ loves traveling to Eastern Europe, because it's like the US in the 1930s.
- ~ gets a high from thrill seeking.
- ~ peppers his conversation with obscure historical facts.
- ~ spends many afternoons in his law office playing guitar.

Four things have affected Al's life more than any other:

1. Having a very high IQ.
2. Being the oldest of four boys.
3. Studying history, especially US and 1914-45 European.
4. Admiration of Moe Howard.

Al's best quote: "In America you can do whatever you want, as long as you're doing what everyone else is doing."

Al's best serious observation: "The inability to control your emotions is one of the worst afflictions you can have."

1960s

When I was five, we went on a terrible family canoe trip. The canoe tipped over and the following floated away: a foam cooler, Mom's other clothes, and me. Al grabbed me and sacrificed the cooler.

Al read the big, famous "beginning and end of the Nazi Party" book when he was eight. Three years later, an instructor said Al knew WWII well enough to teach a class in it.

Al was walking through a lady's yard and she gave him one of her cats. Al named the cat Buff and she was welcomed into the family. Unfortunately, an hour later Al put Buff down the clothes chute. Though kitty was OK, back she went to the lady.

1970s

I was by myself watching a WWII documentary on TV.

Narrator: After the disastrous Battle of Bagration in White Russia, the Germans had just one choice –

Al, walking past the TV: Retreat to the Courland Pocket.

Narrator: Retreat to the Courland Pocket.

Dad passed his good-hearted cynicism onto Al more than anyone else. To Al, most things come down to greed and base enjoyment. When something is presented on a higher plain, he gets skeptical.

One Christmas Al gave me a book as a gift. He borrowed the book that night, and I never saw it again.

In the days before calculators, Al figured out how many seconds our great-grandmother Mutte was alive. Al called Mutte and told her.

Al: Mutte, you've lived 2,838,240,000 seconds.

Mutte: Oh, my goodness.

For the record, Mutte was born in 1883 and passed away in 1991 – 98 years later. That's about three billion seconds.

Business friends of Dad's would sometimes come to our house for dinner. One was a British gentleman who knew a lot of card tricks. Al tried one on the UKer.

Al: I'm flipping through these cards, and you pick one.

Brit, unexpectedly: 14, 72, 1, 5, 43 –

Al: Ergh, you got me!

The Englishman knew that Al was silently counting the cards he was fanning through, so our Euro friend said a jumble of numbers to trip Al up.

Vacations

We were swimming in a motel pool, and I found myself in the deep end – going down. Al grabbed onto me and pulled me into the shallow end. I coughed for five minutes.

We were on a trip to Canada and there was a quick shop. On the side of their building sat stacks of returnable bottles.

"We'll grab as many as we can," said Al. "Then we'll return them at the other store and make some money."

We started to do this, but the owner came running out. "Hey!" he yelled. "Put those bottles back!"

We dropped them and ran. After 10 minutes on the lam, I got tired. "We're OK now," said Al. So, we walked on the main road back to our cabin. A few minutes later, that owner drove by us in his pickup and screeched in front of us.

"Get in!" He demanded. We did so. "Where are your parents?"

Al told him, and the owner drove to the cabins. "There's our Dad," said Al. We all got out.

"Your sons stole my bottles," said the owner.

"Those aren't my sons," said the stranger.

“What?!” barked the owner. Then he looked at Al – the kid who had duped him. Al turned and ran. I surveyed the situation and did the same. We hid in the woods and have been on the run ever since.

We took a family trip to Chicago, and muggers on the Clark Street Bridge (over the Chicago River) confronted Sam, Al and me. They threatened to harm the nine-year-old me, so Al told Sam to give them money, and we got out of it OK.

1975s

Al got this cushy road crew job with the county. He sat around with an orange vest on and drank coffee. But then the 10 o'clock news did an expose on his "work" team, and one worker spoke on camera.

Worker: Some days we don't do nothin'.

That sound bite was played repeatedly on the news promos, and after that, the county worked Al's tail off.

Al went to college and learned something: He couldn't stand the price of textbooks.

Al: It's a total price fix. They have two bookstores – and both have the exact same prices.

Even today, Al's interested in hearing any developments in that industry.

In college, Al made \$35 a week by giving plasma.

Al got the highest grade ever in the class Jazz, Pop & Rock. He never missed a question.

We took a family vacation up in Canada and Al hung out with the bad element in town (though Al was worse than them). Al got picked up by the police and was brought back to our motel room.

Dad to Al: Get a sign, boy!

Translation: Dad told Al to leave the vacation – hitchhike back to St. Louis. Al did so, and he got home in three days.

Al, later: They strip-searched me at the border, beamed a flashlight up my arse, and one night I slept in the back of this unlocked car. Those were the highlights.

1980s

Al worked as a DJ, and he got himself committed to two wedding receptions in one night. So Al prerecorded two hours of songs and had his friend Louis fake it – act like he was DJ-ing at the other wedding.

Louis, a few weeks afterwards: It was terrible. People were yelling, and I ran out of music about halfway through.

After college, Al worked for a shoe retailer. He flew to remote towns to install cash register systems. One time he went to the airport.

Al to the counter clerk: I'm flying on your airline.

Clerk: You Al Brackitt?

Al, surprised: Yes.

Clerk: OK, let's go.

The clerk picked up Al's bags and even flew the plane.

At the shoe company, Al would show up having had 0-2 hours of sleep. He'd tell his boss he was taking a break, then go out to the backseat of his car and snooze.

Al had a 1968 Dodge Coronet, and he spray-painted graffiti all over it. This art-on-wheels conked out in front of another family's house, and it sat there for a few days.

Mom: Al, the police called. You have to move your car, because they got two complaints.

Dad: Only two?

Me to Al: I read where Jimmy Carter was his own chief of staff for awhile, so he actually scheduled who would use the White House tennis court.

Al: Yeah, that's a common story.

Al loved this famous spaghetti restaurant chain, but suddenly their sauce was getting worse. He learned from an employee at the restaurant they had cheapened their recipe. So, Al wrote to the company CEO and stated his concern. Oddly enough, the CEO called Al.

CEO: We haven't changed our recipe. Who gave you this information about watering down our sauce?

Al: No way! You'll fire him.

CEO: We wouldn't do that. Please tell me.

Al never divulged his source.

When Al was in the Loop, he saw Roger Ebert getting into a taxi.

Al, screaming out: Roger Ebert!

Roger looked up...then got into the cab. A few months later, I was reading Roger's book, *Questions for the Movie Answer Man*. Ebert wrote: "A person of taste and manners will notice a star, be pleased to see the star, and grant them their privacy. A nod or a smile is fine. Shouting out their names or pointing them out to other people is a way of indicating you have not made it as far up the evolutionary ladder as you think."

1985s

In law school, Al had no money, but he still went on vacation. He took free weekend tours of timeshares at Lake of the Ozarks ("Redneck Riviera," says Al) and let them try to sell him.

Timeshare salesman: Look at this – we've even been written about in this national magazine.

Al: Sir, that's an ad.

Salesman: Well, they don't accept just any advertising.

We were in Gary, Indiana looking for this famous rock and roll family's original house. It's on Jackson Street.

Doug: I think we went too far.

Al: No, haven't you noticed? The streets follow the reverse order of the presidents. We're at Harrison, so Jackson's coming up after Van Buren.

We went to Macinac Island, Michigan. Al and I floated on this little inflatable raft out to a lighthouse. Al looked up and saw a ferryboat speeding right at us.

Me, panicked: I'm jumping in!

Al, waving his paddle up high: Don't jump!

These big floodlights shone on us, the ferry slowed down and turned away from our raft.

I was in the back of Al's car and had to relieve myself badly. So, I quietly went in an empty soda bottle and put it near my feet. Awhile later I glanced down, and all the...liquid...had poured out under Al's seat. I didn't tell Al what I did because he'd have been angry. I informed him a couple years later.

Al: That car stunk! I took it to a mechanic, and he said a squirrel must've died in the air system, and it all had to be cleaned out. And it still stunk.

Me: Well, that was some years ago, so we can all laugh about it.

Al: I'm not laughing.

When Al was in law school, he recruited me for a mock court trial. I played a karate instructor who had accidentally killed a student. I got off on the criminal charge, but now the student's family was suing me. Al was my defense lawyer. Opposing attorney to me: Could any karate hit kill another person?

Me: Yes.

My defense lawyer shot me this horrified look.

Me: Uh – can I change my answer? No – most hits wouldn't kill someone.

Miraculously, nobody jumped on me for doing that. Now, did Al win the mock trial? They don't decide in these class exercises, so we'll never know.

Our Gram and Grandad kept their car immaculate, and though they owned it five years, they only put 4,000 miles on it. The car was given to Al, and 10 months later, it caught on fire (it started in the wheel-well), and it was junked.

1990s

Around this time, Al decided to remain 19 years old the rest of his life.

When I leave Al's apartment, he'll give me a friendly goodbye and a sack of garbage to throw out for him.

Al and I were at a famous Chicago racetrack, and we saw a jockey surrounded by fans.

Me: When was the last time a St. Louis jockey signed an autograph?

Al: When they were subpoenaing him.

Al relates a lot of information – stuff I haven't heard from others. For example:

~ The Art Deco style came about because King Tut's tomb was discovered. It had the architects going Egyptian.

~ The Impressionists came along because of photography. Since painters no longer needed to make accurate pictures, they got creative.

~ Spiro Agnew was pushed out of the vice presidency because the powerful in Washington didn't think he was presidential material.

Al and I took a trip to Manhattan, and the sidewalk vendors were out..

Vendor, yelling: Hey, cheeseballs here!

Al: What did you call us?

Vendor: What? I didn't call you nothin'.

Al: You called us cheeseballs.

Vendor: Ah, shut up.

Al buys birthday/holiday cards by going up to the rack, skimming the front of the cards, grabbing one and buying it.

Me: You don't even read the inside?

Al: I can assume what it says in there.

Me to Al: The President's always sending the Secretary of State into these world hotspots. What if some dictator decides to keep him?

Al: Oh, yes! They'll say, "Ah ha! Now we've got your Secretary of State!"

I dunno...did I get an answer to that?

Al has a lot of stories about being a lawyer. Once, a prosecutor read the following to him: "Philip generally stated he wasn't there at the time."

Al: What do you mean, Philip "generally" said this?

Prosecutor: No, Generally is his last name. Philip Generally.

Al: Generally? The man's last name is an adverb.

1995s

Annoyance with the media

Al is continually tormented by/fascinated with the popular media, and the following stories reflect that.

When that ex-football star was accused of a capital crime, he escaped authorities and was the subject of a slow-speed chase. Al was bothered that the network interrupted his basketball playoffs.

Me: C'mon, it's a big story.

Al: Yes, a celebrity is accused of a double murder, and now he's going down the highway with a gun to his head. I recognize it's a big story. But I wanna see my game.

Me: That was always a good sitcom.

Al: Yeah, but didya ever notice the kid on that show? He was terrible. He was always looking over at his acting coach.

Me: Didya see that movie?

Al: Yeah, I saw it on a flight. The worst punishment anyone could give would be to strap me in a chair and force me to watch that film, and that's exactly what they did.

Rule of thumb: The more a celebrity is viewed as a genuinely nice person, the more Al thinks he or she's a total phony. However, Al likes many motivational speakers.

Al: These huge celebrity salaries no longer impress me. I want to see the first star who's paid an unlimited amount of money.

Al and Doug were making commercials for their law partnership, and they wanted to look at other ads for reference. Al was assigned to watch several hours of daytime TV – speeded up on the VCR.

Al: Do you know how tough it is to sit through those shows, even on fast forward?

Back to the regular stories

Me to Al: Lincoln said something like, “The law is only there to get you to do the right thing.” Are we supposed to follow the law, or is it OK to break the law if we're doing the right thing instead?

Al: C'mon. You're talking about one of the most basic arguments in the law. This has been debated for centuries.

Me: Oh – I had no idea I was doing that.

Al and the family went to a nice restaurant.

Al: Party of four, non-smoking.

Host: It'll be about 20 minutes. Could I have your last name?

Al: Chickin. C-H-I-C-K-I-N.

Fifteen minutes passed.

Host, calling out: “Chickin, your table's ready.”

Al, friend Luke Westerhold and I went to Johnson's Shut-Ins– a “natural water slide/rapidly rushing through smooth rocks” state park in Missouri. Unfortunately, we went after a flood, and the water was moving way too fast – nobody was going in it. So, we swam up top – in the quieter lake area. While Al and Luke were looking elsewhere, I lost my footing and got drained into the

rushing crushing rapids. I stopped myself halfway through and climbed onto an island-ish rock. I was OK, but stuck – I couldn't go anywhere without getting back in the torrent. A couple sat close by (they had a way out) and observed my personal drama.

Me, yelling over the rushing water: My brother is swimming up at the top! Can you tell him to run down here?

They looked at me and smiled.

Me, louder: Please – get off your behinds and tell my brother to get down here!

They finally acted. Al and Luke came near to me and surveyed my strandedness.

Al, yelling: Go through the rest of the rapids! We'll watch and make sure you're OK.

I did and they did, and everything turned out fine.

The moral to this whole profile is: If I ever go on an ocean cruise, Al is coming with me.

6.5 Food

Ryan

This is something: I offered to buy Ryan a treat and he said, "No thanks." No thanks. Ryan said no thanks to a treat.

I bought these waffles that were wheat free, dairy free, and fat free. They tasted like molded sand. Ironically, only Ryan likes them, and he's always picky about food. I guess it's because these waffles contain nothing.

Ryan had a bag of marshmallows for dinner.

Ryan: You mind if I crack some of these nuts?

Me: No, go right ahead.

Ryan: Do I have to eat the stuff inside?

Me: Ryan, did you ask for that cupcake?

Ryan: I had to get it before somebody else ate it.

Jimmy

Jimmy: Do you know what bon appetite means?

Me: What.

Jimmy: It means goodbye.

Jimmy: I learned how to make ice pops. The TV told me. Dad, let's make ice pops.

Me: OK, we'll do that.

Jimmy: But Dad, we have to let it cool overnight.

Me: Overnight?

Jimmy: Yeah. You have to let it cool overnight. Put the tray in the freezer and let it chill overnight. Then tomorrow on Sunday, we can have banana flavored ice pops. I just wanna make your favorite flavor. Dad, we need to buyyy it.

Me: You really know how to do this.

Jimmy: Yeah, 'cause the ingredients told me.

Jimmy was on the couch with the end of a French bread roll. He burrowed out the white part and consumed it.

Jimmy: I don't want the crust.

Me: Oh, you can give me that part.

Jimmy: OK, just a minute.

A moment later I looked over, and he had the "crust end" stuck on his big toe.

Here's Jimmy's recipe for something he calls, "I should say, the peanut butter cup cookie thing that I made up."

Jimmy: You get cookie dough. It's chocolate chip. I mean not chocolate chip. It's cookie dough without chocolate. And get little tiny pieces of peanut butter cups in the cookie dough. Then you bake it. But don't eat it.

I gave Jimmy a green flavor ice.

Me, later: Jimmy...did you have another flavor ice?

Jimmy: Why do you ask?

Me: Your lips are purple. ...

As punishment for his flavor ice misdeed, Jimmy had to sit with me and watch the news.

Me: Jimmy, there's the president.

Jimmy: George Washington?

Me: No, it's –

Jimmy: Abraham Lincoln? ...

Jimmy: Can I go watch TV now?

Me: OK, give me a hug. Are you ever going to take a flavor pop without asking?

Jimmy: Yeah.

Me: No, are you going to take one again?

Jimmy: Yes.

And he ran off.

Andy

If Andy doesn't want to eat, he gets mad at me for trying to feed him and screams...and I put food in his mouth. He swallows, but gets even angrier and screams again. More food goes in. This is baffling for him.

Andy got spaghetti for the first time today, and I'm sure you can picture it.

I was eating my soup, and the baby threw a toy in it.

Karen has a dreaded fear of salmonella bacteria. I'm surprised she allows chicken nuggets in the house.

We had a lot of an almond cereal left and just a little of a raisin cereal. So I poured raisin into almond, shook it up, and hoped I'd get away with it. I half did. Last night, I saw Karen with a puzzled expression. She was pulling raisins out of her cereal.

Jack

Karen had dinner out with important corporate people from a huge national company. Since the VPs were leaving town the next morning, they gave Karen their doggie bags. Later that night I was hungry, of course.

I thought: Do I eat the leftovers from these people who are wildly more successful than me?

Actually, that's untrue, because I didn't consider anything. I wolfed down their scraps.

I can't taste the difference between sweet peas and early June peas.

My body needs to understand that if I eat a fatty meal, and I don't enjoy it, then I shouldn't gain weight.

I'd like fish if it didn't taste like fish.

I was eating my cereal. I saw a burned black flake in the bowl, and I put it in my pocket.

Family

Jimmy: Mommy, I like good food.

Karen: That's great.

Jimmy: Yeah, I like ham. That's meat, right?

Karen: Yes, it's meat from pigs.

Jimmy: And I like horsemeat, too.

Karen: Where did you get horsemeat?

Jimmy: From a horse.

Jimmy: You know what part of the fish I don't like? The lips.

Me: Oh.

Jimmy: Have you ever had baloney fish?

Me: What's that?

Jimmy: It's like baloney.

Me: Where does it come from?

Ryan: Baloney Fishia Island.

Ryan, whispering: Dad, agree with me. Tell Jimmy the gum he swallowed is radioactive, and tonight he'll be glowing.

Original family

Next time you're here, and you feel Chinese food in the guestroom bed, you can blame me.

Talk

I'm amazed when I see someone leave 1/4 of a large cookie. How could someone not want the rest of a cookie? Especially a big one.

I hear about these food recalls, and it's always for brands I've never heard of. Haven't heard of the brand...the food is recalled...ahem.

Why are products always promoting what they don't have? As if it was a struggle to *not* put in caffeine or coloring.

6.6 Trip to Boysangirls Amusement Park

Today, I took Jimmy to Boysangirls Park. It was a school outing, I was a designated leader, and the kids were going to lead me around all day.

It was a notable morning, because Jimmy awoke in a happy mood.
Jimmy: I'm up! Can we go now?

8:05 am

We arrived at the school, and the teachers said I wouldn't need to report back for 45 minutes. This meant...45 minutes of freedom...in the morning timeframe. I can't tell you anything entertaining about this, because all I did was drink coffee and read a newspaper. But...free time – in the morning! What an experience.

8:55 am

The teacher walked us all out to the school bus. Five minutes later, the bus took off, and all the kids yelled almost as one, "Hey, we're going!"

Buses aren't too different from when I rode them in the 1970s, though this bus was probably from the '70s. Buses now have two-way radios, but those really aren't necessary, because these days all the kindergartners have cell phones.

On the trip there, Jimmy and Tommy mostly sat quiet and looked out the window. The third boy in their seat (three to a seat is easy at that age) was having a conversation with the kid sitting across the aisle. I noted that my middle son has his own life. He looks out the window by himself and he processes the world.

The silence ended – inevitably – because someone talked about his favorite playing cards.

Tommy: I've got every card in the collection.

Jimmy: No way!

Tommy: I do.

Jimmy: Un unh! I seen 'em – you don't.

Tommy: You didn't see my other shoebox.

Jimmy: Oh, that shoebox. I saw that.

9:50 am

We reached Boysangirls. All the kids wanted to see their outdoor sign, but Jimmy couldn't and was frustrated. Once we were stopped, I pointed out the sign to Jimmy, but he didn't care then. They were really excited!

Two paragraphs about Boysangirls

It's one of Chicagoland's oldest amusement parks. They have ornate 1930s-era rides that 1) look nothing like modern ones (good), and 2) are kept in mint condition. Watching my son on a Boysangirls ride is like seeing him

in old home movie. Any grandparent who likes to bring back childhood memories should go to this park.

They have a lot of little kid rides that go around in a circle – helicopters, rocket ships, boats, airplanes and racecars. These rides don't require heavy duty strapping in and big signs warning "pregnant men with heart conditions." They have the right amount of safety.

11:45 Lunch

We each had one of those pre-made, everything-is-in-a-sealed-box lunches – real popular these days. After all that tearing open, I got 4.2 ounces of food – what a rip-off. However, if I ate the plastic and cardboard wrappings I'd find these meals quite filling.

12:15

Back out we went, and we decided to go on the bigger-kids rides. One was this giant swinging Mayflower. It rocks back and forth and sends your stomach into the seat behind you. Before we started, one kid looked off somberly and said, "It's going to be a tough ride."

Last summer we went on one of these ships, and Ryan made the mistake of yelling to the ride operator that he wasn't going fast enough. One should never challenge a ride operator. The guy stopped the ride (!), had Ryan and me get into the rear seat, and gave us a profound experience.

We wandered into the arcade area, but I wasn't going to pay for video games when there are all those free rides outside. Unfortunately, Jimmy and Tommy were too old to play the three-year-old's favorite videos: Game Over and Insert Coin.

The next ride was this spidery thing – it goes around as these eight legs move up and down. I was in a spider foot by myself, and I tried to get an in-the-air photo of Jimmy and Tommy. But every time I was in the right position, all I'd see were the backs of their heads. Who'd have guessed there's a set pattern to this spider-like ride?

We went on the Ferris wheel, and I helped the kids think we were stranded at the top.

Boys: We're stuck! Help us!

We finally got down and they thanked the ride operator profusely.

Tommy, later: I knew we weren't stuck.

Jimmy: I was pretending too – going along with the scene.

We got on the ride that puts us in half-pods and swings us around.

Jimmy, afterwards: That was dizziating.

Tommy: One time we went on this ride and my Dad was a big, big chicken, and I had to help him.

We were about to get on the log flume.

Kids: Yay! We're gonna get wet!

Me to the ride operator: What's the driest spot in the log?

Operator: In the back.

Suddenly, "in the back" became my favorite spot in the log. Then our log arrived, the kids jumped into the back, and I got the drench seat. Since there wasn't a line, the ride operator let us go through again. Then he offered to let us go yet another time.

Tommy: Can't we do that again?

Jimmy: No, I'm getting seasick.

2:00

When I finally get a map in my head of these parks – when I learn where everything is – it's time to leave.

This school knows just when to end events for these little kids. Jimmy was getting particularly grumbly. We only had seven minutes and thus couldn't go on the roller coaster – there was a long line.

Jimmy: Ohhhhhhhh....DANG IT!

This is a big curse in Jimmy's world, so it was a serious moment.

Naturally, I thanked the teachers very much for giving us a splendiferous day. We were driving back and I got reflective.

I thought: It's weird that I'll never see Boysangirls Park again. No wait, hold it. I can see it any time I want.

6.7 Money

Ryan

Me: I thought that food was way too expensive.

Ryan: Dad, just learn to let it go.

Me: What would you do with five million dollars?

Ryan: Buy CDs.

Jimmy

Jimmy: Can I have cash for my wallet?

Me: Um, no.

Jimmy: But Grandma Martha says I'm allowed to have cash in there.

Jack

Karen manages all the money in the family. I receive an allowance that isn't too different from the one you gave me many years ago. Back when I was 11, I got \$4 a week from you. Adjusting for inflation, it's clear I was wealthier then than now.

I'm always looking at the price of things. I want to know how much everything costs. If someone buys something substantial and I don't ask them the price, they should rest assured I'd like to know, but I'm being mannerly.

Talk

The hardest part about being super rich would be the horses – all that riding, polo playing and jumping. If one of those horses bit me – with those big teeth – I'd flip out. I choose to stay poor and free of horse bites.

6.8 Trip to Stoughton, WI

We went away to Stoughton, WI – about 2 1/2 hours north of us. We visited with our friends the Johansen family: Heather (wife/mom), Terrence (husband/dad) and Taylor (son/son). Karen packed nice little suitcases for the boys, and I used grocery sacks for me.

Saturday

I'm not a big fan of tollways. It seems much of the toll money we pay goes to collect the toll money – a little redundant. I propose we cut the toll cost in half and nobody collects it.

We stopped at one of the exclusive gas/fast food places along the toll route, and a medium frozen yogurt was \$3.40.

Me: Ryan, that's way too expensive. We'll get you something else later.

Ryan: But I haven't had dessert in three days.

Me: What about the ice cream you had yesterday?

Ryan: That was just a treat.

Gripping in the car

Jimmy: It's not my fault I'm grumpy. You woke me at 7:30.

Andy was crabby. He knocked the ba-ba out of my hand, and that comforted him a little.

Me: I'm glad we're not going all the way to St. Louis, because you guys complain a lot.

Ryan: I know. Look how much we've been complaining so far.

Arrival

We suddenly brightened up when we saw our kind hosts.

Some fun facts about the Johansens

Heather runs a company in town, and she gets involved in neighborhood activities. Notably, her father produced the 16mm school films everyone has seen...those 1950s/60s ones covering science, safety, other countries, and so on.

Terrence Johansen is a big fan of tasteless roadside attractions – giant fiberglass dinosaurs, weird museums, etc. He writes about them. Terrence also worked at a major pizza/video kids place for nine years, but surprisingly he's not jumpy.

Taylor Johansen is all kid.

Their home...

Their Victorian house was built in 1892, and that makes it one of the newer homes in Stoughton.

Heather has discovered all these creative home-enhancement products. For example, she has a basket with a zig-zag bottom – it sits on two steps. Reason: If you're upstairs and you need to take something downstairs later, you throw it in the basket, carry the basket down and leave it at the bottom of the steps. We have a similar arrangement at our house, except there's no basket and things lie all over the steps.

Also, Heather has a nightlight that goes on when the light switch goes off.

Taylor has his own playroom, and Dad Terrence spent a lot of time straightening it for us visitors. Then the three boys tore it apart.

We adults and Baby Andy were sitting in the living room enjoying conversation.

Noises above us: Wam! Wam! Bam! Stomp, stomp, stomp.

Taylor came running into the living room.

Taylor: Mom, can you put this shield on me?

Heather did so, and the gladiator gave her a hug in return.

Terrence: We're always doing laundry. I think we should go around naked more.

A little about Stoughton

It's a small town, and extremely charming. They have a quaintness police – a tough committee that scrutinizes the look of stores, houses, etc. If a fellow put up vinyl siding, they'd make him 1) replace it, and 2) put a wicker rooster on his lawn for three months.

Sunday

Heather baked some apples for breakfast. They were good – better than my toaster waffles. This meal reminded me that many ladies have their special recipes, and these dishes don't find themselves in restaurants...even though they should. I mean, every restaurant has open-face turkey dishes, but, hmm. I guess I don't know what I mean. Next week, I'll try baking apples for the boys.

It was time to head back to Chicago. Of course, we thanked the Johansens for their great hospitality.

Some weeks later, we told Grandma and Grandpa Markley about the Stoughton trip. Grandpa Fritz said he likes Stoughton, because of this story: When Fritz was playing high school football, his team came up against the bigger Stoughton team. This large Stoughton player was supposed to catch the ball, but it bounced out of his hands, landed in Fritz's arms, and Fritz got the touchdown.

Fritz: It was my moment of glory.

6.9 Technology

Jimmy

Jimmy: Never plug something in when it's on.

Karen

This story is told in five easy steps.

1) It was dark, Karen was asleep, and I was about to get in bed.

2) I took the alarm clock and pushed the wrong button – the one that gives you 59 minutes of radio and counts itself down. It blasted out music and almost woke Karen.

Me: Oh jeez!

3) I reduced the volume and clicked the 59 minutes down to zero. Why not let the radio drone on soundlessly for 59 minutes? Because the radio and alarm volumes are tied together, so if I didn't have a high setting, the alarm would go off silently, and that wouldn't wake me.

4) After clicking down, I forgot which button was which, and did step 1 again. But this time I hit that wrong button twice and got 1 hour 59 minutes of music.

5) I clicked it down 119 times, and that might be a world's record.

Karen assigned me to change the light bulb in the bathroom ceiling. This turned out to be a multi-day project.

Day 1: Went to sleep early, so I didn't do it.

Day 2: Discovered we didn't have light bulbs.

Day 3: Was informed by Karen that we did indeed have bulbs. But then I couldn't find the ladder.

Day 4: Realized I could stand on the sink and change the bulb. I got the old one out, but I couldn't remember which way to put the new one in – clockwise or counter-clockwise. Standing on the sink gave me a poor vantage point.

Day 5: Rested and contemplated.

Day 6: Got the ladder and did it!

Jack

Here's something I learned the hard way: Don't put AA batteries and spare change into the same pocket. It brings a new meaning to hot pants.

Extended family

Martha thoroughly reads the manuals for our cars and appliances.

Martha: Oh, here – setting the clock is easy. I'll do it for you.

What more could a son-in-law ask for?

Talk

Why is it some radios won't get decent reception unless they're upside down? They should just design the radio upside down.

I'd pay \$200 to resolve all the small questions that machines throw at me.
Yes, I want...
~ regular unleaded.
~ to start the pump now.
~ to continue starting this computer even though messages like, "Conflict with your network extension, continue? Yes/No" messages always pop up...since it works fine despite these dire warnings.
~ to hear that one voicemail message that I have, because if I didn't want to hear it I wouldn't have accessed voicemail. ...

Getting beyond technology: No, I don't want...
~ an apple pie with that.
~ to change my cellular service. No, but thank you for calling. Really, no – thank you for calling.
~ It's B-R-A-C-K-I-T-T. Two Ts, yes.

I can't understand why digital alarm clocks have to be reset forwards. For example: The clock reads 11:00 pm, and I need to change the time to 10:45 pm. That requires 23 clicks forward for the hour, and...I can't figure out how many clicks for the minutes, but it's a lot.

6.10 Trip to Lake Zurich and Freeport, IL

We took a quick trip to see Karen's brother, Neil Berensen, in Lake Zurich – 40 miles northwest of Chicago. The whole region is called Lake County, and that gives an indication of what's up there. (Lakes.)

Me: Do you have to use the bathroom before we leave?

Jimmy: No.

Me: Ryan, do you have to go?

Ryan: No.

We left, and I had to go.

We pulled up to the tollbooth, and the attendant was engrossed in a conversation with his coworker.

Me, handing him a dollar: Here you go.

Booth attendant to his coworker: I was telling the guy that.

Me, after receiving my change: Thank you.

Booth man: I don't know why he called me.

Neil has a split-level bachelor's house. This means there is...
~ one room for his stereo equipment.
~ another for his videotapes.
~ a different room for his computer.
~ and the living room holds his hockey-related collections...including a row of seats from a torn down Chicago stadium.

We went to the real live lake in Lake Zurich, but since the kids didn't have swimsuits, all activities were limited to the shoreline. Of course, they still got wet. Ryan swung out on a rope swing and ended up waist deep in the water.
Ryan: Aw, nuts!

Jimmy walked along the beach with no shoes on.
Me: Jimmy, stay where I can see you.
Jimmy: Dad, I'm looking at a dead fish.
He leaned in, almost fell on the fish, but did a half-twist and sat down in the water.
Jimmy: I kind of fell.

It was a memorable experience, primarily because lake odor permeated the minivan for a while.

An ignorant person writes about Lake Zurich

In the early half of the 20th century, Lake Zurich was mostly a same-day vacation spot for big city Chicago folks who wanted to loll around in the lake but not over-vacationize. In the 1970s, big companies sprang up relatively close to the town (those giant campus-ish buildings with the pond out front).

Lake Zurich grew because people wanted to live in a nice town near these big buildings. In 1980, the population of Lake Zurich was 3,000, and now it's 20,000.

Near Neil, they're building a new subdivision with maybe 24 homes. The developer wants a change in zoning laws so he can get more houses onto smaller lots, and that about says it all.

Freeport, IL

After seeing Neil, we drove west to Freeport, IL, 110 miles from Chicago. Doug's wife Peggy has a twin sister named Madeline, and she lives in Freeport with her husband Irvin Nielsen. Freeport is the site of a Lincoln-Douglas debate – the one where Douglas pulled a knife on old Abe.

Me: Do you want to be the map-reader?

Ryan: Do I have to?

Me: Yes.

Ryan was reading the map.

Me: Does it say Highway 26?

Ryan: It says 24.

Me: Close enough.

Along the way, there's a huge car plant. I like seeing manufacturing facilities, because they mean jobs for the region. The only problem is: They don't have a display car on top of their front entrance – up high there. What's the world coming to when an auto plant won't put a car on top of their entryway?

Ryan: Jim, on this trip could you do me a favor and not tear up Dr. Irv's house?

Freeport has a lot of small stores. It also has a mega-place called Feed & Truck. There was some sort of ownership breakup, so in Wisconsin it's called Truck & Feed.

Ryan: Aunt Madeline, this is a nice place. Do you have a maid?

Madeline: Yeah, I'm the maid.

Madeline and Peggy are fraternal twins, but they do look alike. At Peggy's wedding, I got confused and gave best wishes to Madeline.

Peggy and Madeline became nurses in the Philippines together, came to Chicago together, and even shared a bed because one worked the first shift and the other the second shift. Then Doug came along and whisked Peggy off to St. Louis. Instead, Doug should have become a nurse and worked the third shift.

Dr. Irvin Nielsen is an orthopedic surgeon, so I never know when we'll be especially grateful he's around. He's also a woodworking fanatic. Other people have metal garden dispensers and yard lights, but Irvin makes them out of wood. He's the only bone doctor who's sad they don't use splints anymore.

Wedding memories

A few years back, Irvin and Madeline married up in Racine, WI, and of course, I was the center of attention. Three stories about that day:

1. Doug's parrot Sylvester was also on the trip (long story), and he accidentally flew away. Sylvester had to be given up for lost. Weeks later, Irvin's mother was looking through the local newspaper and saw an ad about a found bird, and it turned out to be Sylvester. He had landed on this kid's shoulder and was hungry for real food – none of that wild stuff.

2. Brother Al was supposed to usher at the wedding, but he got caught in rotten traffic and arrived way too late. Luckily, Al's tuxedo was already at the church. Madeline simply put friend Bert Dunne into Al's tux, made him the usher, and went on with the ceremony.

3. Irvin and Madeline planned a nice honeymoon in Toronto, but Irvin was on call, so Madeline went without him. (Of course, they met up there later.)

7. July

7.1 Timeline

We have all these fans and air conditioners going, so we can't hear each other. I was upstairs and Ryan called for me.

Ryan: Dad! [Something something] boogie board [something]?

I didn't ask him to repeat it, because any topic about a boogie board could wait.

Outdoor classical music

We went to this Chicagoland outdoor music-playing place. I walked in, and they had two major sections:

1. The traditional theater seating with the orchestra on the front – like I see in the cartoons. They're well known for playing classical music – that's what we saw – but lotsa types of musicians perform there. I dare say no punk rock.

2. Off to the left is a large grassy area where people sit, but it's nothing like Woodstock. Patrons have expensive picnic-ware: folding chairs that sit two inches off the ground, special containers for wine and cheese – they're living it up.

An employee walked around with a sign reading, "Please Remain Quiet." I couldn't stop talking about it.

Naturally, they played classical music. I never know when these pieces are ending their subsections (auras?) and I shouldn't applaud, or when I'm supposed to cheer...so I just clapped along the entire time.

Haircut

Jimmy: I don't want to go get a haircut.

Me: Then Mommy will do it for you.

Jimmy: OK, I'll go.

I was dreading this because it was Saturday, and the place is always packed then. I called ahead and made three reservations for us – me, Ryan and Jimmy. (Andy receives haircuts from two stylists: his Mom and daycare provider Gwen.)
Ryan: Can they spell my name in my hair?

As I suspected, the stylist shop was crammed – about 10 people were waiting, and some looked quite impatient. I figured we'd wait a while, but...

Clerk: Ryan, Jimmy, Jack – you are next.

Those waiting were in angry disbelief – how could this be? (It was because I called ahead.)

Me, not wanting to start a riot: Two of us can wait if you want.

Clerk: No, you three are next! Come on.

I'm lucky nobody threw a fancy shampoo bottle at me.

Ryan sat down with the stylist.

Me to the coiffeur (I looked that name up): Can you make his hair short.

Ryan: No, I want it long.

I wasn't going to get into a big disagreement, so we left the stylist with these contradictory instructions. But, ah! This man was clever. He cut Ryan's hair short, but then...he jelled it. Ryan looked like Rudolph Valentino, Jr., and he loved it.

Ryan: Jim, stay a mile away from my hair.

I again forgot to make one request: Give Jimmy bangs. I always let them part his hair on he side and cut his bangs at an angle. This lasts about an hour, then the part goes away, and it looks like the boy is falling over.

Me: And how's my hair?

Ryan: It looks like a cactus.

7.2 Andy at 12 months

I say nice things to the baby like, “We love you,” and, “Oh, you’re so special to us.” But he really likes me to speak his language: “Dah! Bah! Grgh!”

Andy’s current vocabulary:

uh oh

ba-ba

up

Baby handed his little plastic star to me. I looked at it, examined it, and handed it back.

Andy: Gah! Mmem la!

I made a home video of the baby crawling, walking and talking. He walks all the way across a room now. It’s funny, because all the parts of him haven’t grown up evenly yet. He’s still got the little baby face and expressions, but now they’re on this roaming body. Unfortunately, the two older kids were in rotten moods in the taping session. Ryan tried to look annoyed at being there, and Jimmy kept throwing pillows at me. It’s all in one cherished video.

7.3 Circle update

About every night of the week, I talk with friend Marco Torez, and I want to tell you a little more about him. Marco is a Puerto Rican bachelor who works overnight as a security guard. Marco...

- ~ discusses everything about Chicago.
- ~ is an authority on the Bible. He's read all of it at least five times.
- ~ has a friend who doesn't trust banks. If someone gives this man a check from a bank that's 50 miles away, he'll drive to the bank and get his cash right then.
- ~ learned how to drive when he was 30. Previously, he carried a state ID card.

I got together with friend Tim Campbell in Woodstock, IL. It's about 62 miles northwest of Chicago, and it's where they filmed that movie where the fellow relives the same day every day. Some years ago, the Campbells left St. Louis city life, and they bought this impossibly long house in the country. I'm one of the few people who has walked from one end to the other.

7.4 Andy's birthday

Yesterday was Andy's first birthday, and we had a nice party for him. These occasions are also a lot of fun for adults. But the best thing about any party we throw is finally having our home clean and straightened.

Related note: When the wife is complimented on how nice her home looks, she replies, "Thank you." The husband replies, "You should've seen this place yesterday – it was a pit. We spent five hours cleaning it."

Preparation story: In the pantry, we had an unopened pack of birthday cups that had been hanging around for two years.

Me to Karen: We'll use these for the birthday party.

Karen: Oh, those are so old.

Me: Hmh. Should I throw 'em out?

Karen: We'll find a use for them.

Then the folks arrived. This was my opportunity for friend Sid (the wine connoisseur) to try a sip from my \$6.99 jug of burgundy. He smelled it and winced.

Sid: Ho man, Jack – c'mon!

Me: OK, what? Explain the problems from a wine expert's perspective.

Sid: It's pure sugar, man. It's got nothing else going on. Why do you drink this stuff?

Me: Red wine – clears your arteries.

Sid: Yeah, like drain cleaner.

As for the birthday boy, he was just happy to have a free run of the entire floor, because no gates were up.

We grownups mostly talked about Chicago real estate, because there's always plenty to discuss. I pulled out a couple of city maps (one showed rapid transit rail lines), spread them out on the floor, and we all hunched over them. This made a baby's birthday party look more like a war room.

Marco was particularly helpful, because he knows most neighborhoods and street numbers. Lou and Jessica Morgan also added information, because they remodel homes in the city.

Jessica Morgan: Is Sid handy?

Elizabeth : You've gotta be kidding me.

Ryan: Can I balance the cake?

7.5 Birth of Andy

Don't be confused! This story is a flashback to July, 1998.

7/24/98 Friday, 6:00 pm

On Sunday at 5:00 pm, Karen would go in for her inducement, and I wouldn't be able to do much with Ryan and Jimmy for a few days. So, the boys and I pitched a tent in the yard. Ryan ate a whole bag of crunchy cheese snacks. I read them a spooky story about this family of pioneers, and it flipped Jimmy out in a positive way.

9:00 pm

They got tired of it all, so I took down the tent. Karen was watching this ongoing news story about a tragic shooting at the Washington DC capitol. Of course, we felt terrible for those poor people and their families.

Saturday, 12:10 am

We turned in. I slept downstairs and she upstairs – because these days, Karen was taking up a lot of the bed.

3:00 am

I half-heard Karen saying she was in labor.

4:00 am

Karen woke me and asked if I could get her purse so she could call the doctor.

Me: Sure, of course.

I paid attention to the call, and the doctor was telling Karen to go to the hospital. Karen had her suitcase already packed – a little hard-sided one with a top handle, just like the ones used by 1950s sitcom women in labor.

4:20 am

I woke Grandma Martha and she got up right away. Martha walked with Karen outside, and I ran four blocks for my little car. Karen got in carefully and off we went.

Me: Do you want any air?

Karen: Yes, a little bit.

No traffic at this time of night. We pulled into the parking garage and walked around to the emergency room. Karen was put into a wheelchair and we were taken right past this big sign: "No Entrance to Main Hospital," into the main hospital.

We got to the Labor Receiving ward and were put in this little "curtains all around the single bed" area. The medical people came in and out and talked

to Karen. I put my feet up on my briefcase (I always carry that), read a biography of Ben Franklin, and quasi-slept in the chair.

8:45 am

Doctor to Karen: You'll be fine. I suggest you go home for a while. Back we went. I dropped Karen off at the house and found a parking space some ways from home.

10:15 am

Karen immediately went to bed, and Ryan and Jimmy stayed affixed to their Saturday morning TV shows. Martha went downstairs then rushed back up.

Martha: Jack, there's a parking space! Right in front of the house.

Me: Wonderful! Go lie down in it!

We got the space. I was glad to see Karen sleeping, because she worried she wouldn't be able to. I talked with Ryan.

Ryan, looking at the television but talking to me: I thought you'd be coming back with the baby.

Me: Not yet – this is kind of a long process.

Ryan: We made a spot for Andy in front of the TV.

I took a nap.

3:30 pm

Martha: Jack, wake up. Karen's water broke.

Oh my gosh. Was this an immediate "the baby's head's popping out – get her over there!" situation? It wasn't *that* urgent, but we left again. Lots more traffic this time.

Karen was put into one of the "birthing rooms." This is a regular patient room, but it's got the equipment and rocking chair necessary to have the baby right there.

I forgot the stopwatch, so I called Martha and drove back home to get it. When I arrived, Martha was on the steps with that stopwatch in hand, making her look like a pit crew chief. I went inside. Jimmy was there, and he asked about Mommy. He also wanted to see a carton character's Internet site – but that had to wait.

On my drive back, a particular 1970s song was on the radio. I took it an omen and called Brother Doug – that band's biggest fan – and updated him on the delivery.

Doug: Tell Karen we're patiently waiting down here for little Andy.

5:15 pm

Karen was in bed and having painful contractions every five minutes. She squeezed my left hand, but since I had my wedding ring on the squeezing Really Hurt Me. I asked Karen to switch to my non-ring hand and she punched me.

Karen: Take the ring off!

I think she meant temporarily.

Karen was screaming to high heaven, and security came in (!) to inquire what all the noise was about. Apparently, women in labor aren't supposed to yell anymore.

The Epidural Man (EM) came to the rescue. He asked Karen to sit up, and she did. EM: I'm sending a line around your spinal cord, so you'll need to sit still – even if you have a contraction.

Me: She won't move, don't worry.

EM was right in the middle of his procedure and a contraction came over Karen. Even so, she held herself completely still.

EM: That was impressive.

Then Karen had to lie flat, and that caused a problem.

Karen: This is making me pass out, I think.

Me: Could she lay on her side?

The EM explained she couldn't be on one side or the epidural would only work on that side, and nothing could be done then.

Karen: Lay me flat – I'd rather pass out.

6:10 pm

Karen stayed conscious and started feeling better. The epidural was working!

7:05 pm

I called Martha and said Karen's cervix was at seven centimeters, and that meant we were on our way (10 is the magic number). But I heard wrong, because it was only two. And she'd been in labor a long time.

8:15 pm

Concern was rising a little. Karen wasn't dilating much, and the doctor didn't like the amount of oxygen the baby was getting. Oh man, I thought.

Doctor: How would you feel about a c-section?

Karen: I'm ready for that.

Me, thinking about the oxygen: Absolutely.

The c-section was somewhat familiar to us, because four years earlier, Karen had the operation with Jimmy.

8:35 pm

Three residents came in to wheel Karen off for pre-op (fancy term).

Resident to me: Do you need anything?

Me: No thanks, I've just gotta work the TV remote.

They chuckled at this, but I was serious.

Let's talk about someone extremely unimportant in this whole process – me. They gave me hospital garb to put on, because I was going to be close by Karen during the delivery.

There was a comedy movie on TV. Since it was one of my Dad's favorites, I took it as a great sign.

A nurse came in and took me into the operating room. Nine medical people were in there. I won't detail what was being performed on Karen, but it was like being inside a public television surgery documentary.

Karen was quite conscious but tired. I stood on her right, up near her head.

Anesthesiologist to Karen: Baby's coming. There's going to be a lot of pushing.

Karen: It feels like somebody's pulling on my dress.

After much effort, this little head emerged from Karen's lower stomach. We heard him scream, and Karen said later that relieved her tremendously.

Nurse: What do you say? 9:14.

Andy was taken into an area off to the side.

Nurse to me: Do you want to come over and see him?

Me: Oh sure, yes.

This surprised me, because they didn't ask if I wanted to see Jimmy right before he was born. This was because Jimmy had stopped breathing twice and was revived. Reason: Karen had necessary medication that made her sluggish, but it slowed Jimmy down as well. (I'm not giving this enough space here – it meant everything to us.)

When I met him, Andy was three minutes old and lying under a lamp. He was a very good boy.

Me to the nurse: How is he?

Nurse: He's big – 9 lbs 8.9 oz. – and he's got good coloring.

I remembered how the other boys looked on their birthdays. Newborn Ryan swam in place for a long time. Because baby Jimmy came out a month early, he had tubes everywhere.

Andy was just looking around, biting on his hands a little bit.

Me: So Andy, your name is Andrew Charles Brackitt. You have two older brothers – Ryan and Jimmy. Ryan's 8 1/2 and Jimmy's 4 1/2. They'll take care of you a whole lot. You have a Mom who's Karen, and a Dad who's me. You have Grandma Martha and Grandpa Fritz, and you've got Grandma Alice and your Grandpa up in heaven. We all love you very much.

The nurse attended to Andy with great skill. She put a little tube into his stomach and got some goop out. Then she took his footprints for the birth certificates, and his feet went off the page (carrying on a family trait).

The nurse swaddled Andy and asked if I wanted to take him over to see Karen. Sure! Karen turned her head to look at him.
Karen: Ohh, my baby! His skin's so soft. What a handsome baby.

I watched Karen getting sewn up.
Me: If you could see what's going on down there, you'd –
Karen: Don't describe it.

Important note: We're completely grateful to the doctors, nurses and all for delivering a very healthy Andy. And Ryan. And Jimmy.

9:40 pm

I gave Andy back to the nurse. Karen was transferred to a rolling bed, and I walked with her to the recovery room. She closed her eyes, and I went out to the pay phones. I called Grandma Martha and said the excellent news. Her voice was breaking.
Martha: I'm very relieved everything was fine.

Then I called my mom.
Mom: Oh, I wish I could see him right now. That baby weighed about as much as you did. You were 8 lbs. 16 oz.
Me: Mom, I think 16 ounces would be another pound.
Mom: Well, that's what you were.

I went back into the recovery room with Karen, and we talked for an hour about...
~ Andy, and what a good baby he is.
~ the older boys – how they'll be protective brothers.
~ the bright mood Karen was suddenly in – no more big stomach lump.

The nurse wanted Karen to wiggle her toes, and Karen could...
Karen: But I can't feel myself doing it.
She was on the recovery trail.

Karen was wheeled into her room, and they brought the baby in. I took a flash picture of those two, and it made Andy jump – sorry! We admired our

baby, then they took him away for a little while. Karen fell asleep, and I went downstairs.

11:00 pm

I walked to the nearby open-till-four-am pizza place (an advantage to being in Chicago), and I talked with two homeless men in front.

Me: My wife just had a baby boy.

Man: Is he all right?

Me: Yes.

Man: It's a miracle! Ah ha.

7.6 Doug Brackitt profile

Ryan: Uncle Doug's always saying to me, "Ryan, I'm under a great deal of pressure."

Me: Why does he say that?

Ryan: I have no idea. I mean, it's his problem, not mine.

Doug...

~ was born close to 1960.

~ sneezes when he steps outside...just like I do.

~ has the longest set of "rules to lead your life by" of anyone I know.

~ is fun to aggravate, because he's such a defined character.

For someone only in his latter 30s, Doug's been through many stages in life:

#	Dates	Ages	Era
1)	1962-69	00-07	Rambunctious
2)	1970-72	08-10	Working
3)	1973-84	11-22	Entertainment
4)	1985-87	23-25	Reality
5)	1988-93	26-31	Climbing
6)	1994-98	32-36	Success
7)	1999-	37-	Reentertainment

Let's figure these eras out.

1) 1962-69 00-07 Rambunctious

Dad, recalling: I was sitting in the family room and I heard water running. I thought, "What? Who's doing that?" So I went into the kitchen and there was two-year-old Doug, frying bacon.

Mom: I was always running after Doug, because he got into everything. Once, he fell out of a window, and to this day, he says I pushed him.
(Oh gosh, he's joking.)

2) 1970-72 08-10 Working

Doug got me up in the dark hours of Saturday mornings to watch cartoons – so early we'd see the farm reports first.

CB radios were all the rage. On one family trip, that radio didn't help Dad much, because he got pulled over for speeding. Dad was sitting with the officer in the squad car, and Doug's voice came over the cop's CB radio.

Doug: We're feedin' the bears!

When Dad got back in the car, he smacked Doug.

In the car, Doug and I played Hangman. In this game, players try to decode a familiar phrase or name by choosing letters. I was winning, so Doug made me figure out “by bulls,” and he won. By bulls?

Doug’s second grade teacher read them the famous book about the pig and the spider, and at one point – everyone who’s read it knows where – she was overcome with emotion, and she had to leave the room.

About once a day, Doug and I would get into a scuffle over something. It usually involved me taking his possessions, because he had money to buy things and I didn’t. Al described our fights as the battling windmills.

Doug was much shorter than the other kids on his basketball team – this is evident by their team photo. But Doug showed courage by staying on the team, and got an award for Mr. Improvement. (Doug is now 5’10”, but that’s where he stops.)

3) 1973-84 11-22 Entertainment

When Doug was in 5th grade, he talked me into playing hooky with him and his friend. Part of the day, we hung out at this creek. Then, we went home (nobody there) and spent a few more hours trying to type up excuse notes for ourselves – handwriting was out of the question. ...

We got caught because Doug’s friend left his schoolbooks at home. His dad thoughtfully took them to the school, and our tutorial crime was discovered. Surprisingly, we didn’t get punished too much. I think Mom and Dad were just too speechless.

Doug gave me advice about algebra.
Doug: Just remember that X is always seven.

During the Bicentennial, we were on vacation at Kentucky Lake, and the state/county/town didn’t allow fireworks. On the big 4th of July day, the motel we stayed at threw an impressive outside party...no fireworks, of course. However, someone snuck behind a bush and set off an entire brick of illegal firecrackers. ...

The motel people were furious. They conducted an impromptu investigation, but they never learned who did it. Even now, I’ll bet some of those motel people would like to know who set off those fireworks.

Concerts

Doug was totally into rock concerts, and this obsession has never left him – he attends as many now as he ever did. Back then, concert tickets were about \$6 each, and there were a lot of shows.

Doug had tickets for a concert by a particular rock band (the lead singer swings the microphone like a lasso). Someone stole Doug's tickets off the kitchen table, and he still talks about it roughly once a month. Doug could live to be 400 years old...

Investigator: We went back in the time machine and found that [name] took your tickets.

Doug: I knew it!

It was a huge deal when the biggest album band of the 1970s put St. Louis on their tour (April, 1977). Mom let Doug skip school so he could stand in line all day for tickets. It took 9 1/2 hours – no water, food or bathroom. Everyone was allowed a maximum of four tickets (which would be highly scalvable later), but Doug had only \$7.

Doug, after finally getting to the clerk: One, please.

Clerk: You only want one?

Doug...

~ went to one concert and they couldn't get the keyboard going. Roadies were wrenching on it the whole time.

~ saw a band that had only one hit song, so they played it twice.

Doug saw a general admission concert – infamous for trampling people... Doug: It was one of the most fearful experiences of my life. We were outside waiting to get in. There were thousands of people smashing in at once, and since I was only 5'2", they were *really* squishing me. So, I got above it all – I climbed onto the back of some guy in front of me, and I placed myself there. It was that jammed. Suddenly, all the admission gates collapsed. Everybody crashed forward on top of each other, but at least we could get in. We walked over the broken gates, never gave 'em tickets, and all the security people were standing off to the side, just dumbfounded.

Cooking

On weekends, Doug worked as a cook at an all-night neighborhood diner. This wasn't an "our family needed the money," situation – Doug wanted the money.

Doug would call Al and ask a ride home, and Al would only do it if Doug brought him fried clams. Getting them was a problem for Doug, because the restaurant didn't allow employees to take food out the door. So, Doug hid the clams in his hat, and Al ate them out of it.

Doug had two managers over his time at the restaurant. The first boss always got breaks from the health inspector, but the second one didn't. Doug knew why: The first manager made payoffs.

Doug...

~ owned this special, long pancake turner called a spat – it was very professional looking. I found it perfect for cleaning out our gutters.
~ prepared breakfast for a three-hit Midwest band, which brought together his concert-going and cooking.

Doug was the only cook working at 2:00 am, and he started doubling over in pain. He called his manager and asked for a replacement. The manager said no way – stay and work. ...

Doug knew he needed to get to a hospital. He looked into the dining room, and there was a former cook eating there – the restaurant had fired this fellow some weeks earlier. Doug talked the guy into taking over, and a waitress drove Doug to the emergency room. The diagnosis: Doug needed his appendix out. The next morning, the manager called Mom and apologized profusely.

College

In college, Doug moved into the stupidest and loudest dorm on campus.

~ Several students had 0.0 GPAs.

~ Guys turned on fire hoses.

~ Someone put a telephone pole on the main floor.

Why did Doug live there?

Doug: These are my friends.

Doug and his roommate often crashed parties.

Doug to a gal: Hey, this party stinks. Let's you and I get out of here.

Gal: I can't – this is my apartment.

After a while, Doug tired of the rioting in his dorm and decided to live in my dorm. It was a designated "quiet floor," and the silent residents there never understood Doug. For example, one of them had special permission for an air conditioner, and Doug felt the cool air seeping from his room. So, Doug slept outside the guy's door.

4) 1985-87 23-25 Reality

Right after college, Doug was the poorest person in the industrial world. Strange as it may seem now, Doug's computer science degree was an oddity – there weren't lots of offers in that field. For a while, Al, Sam and I each had two cars – it's a St. Louis thing – but Doug was car-less. So, it was ironic that he only got approved for a gas station credit card. But he sure used it – it was all he had to purchase things. Doug learned what every one of these stations in the city sold, and he even shopped there for Christmas presents.

Fate has a way of sorting things out. Our grandmother was terminally ill with cancer, and she was convalescing at our home. Doug was able to be with Gram hour after hour, and he brought her companionship.

Doug landed a good night job in the computer department of an insurance company. How much value was college?

Doug: Actually, being a cook was my best experience, because I learned to do several things at once.

Doug finally got a car, and he used his horn so much it wore out.

I worked at a radio station and my friend, Larry Lawrence, was a rush hour DJ – very good at making crank phone calls.

Larry to me: Where does your brother work?

Me: He's the night computer guy at this company that processes insurance checks.

Larry offered to make a crank call on Doug, and I jumped at the opportunity. ...

Doug, answering: Can I help you?

Larry: My name is Phil Ryerson, and I work at the meat processing division here in Jefferson City – we're a customer of yours. I'm told you have my disability check there, and it's been real hard for me to get it.

Doug: I'm sorry to hear that, sir. If you could call –

Larry: Hey, tell you what. If you send me my check right now, I'll mail you a box of steaks. How about that.

Doug: Sir, I couldn't do that. ...

Then we let Doug in on the secret.

Doug: I was tempted! I know where they keep those checks.

5) 1989-93 27-31 Climbing

Doug, recalling: I saw that Al was successful as a lawyer, and I decided I needed to be successful too.

Al got Doug an interview with the Dean of his old law school, and we anxiously waited. Would Doug get accepted into this prestigious school of law? Doug...squeaked in! On the bottom of the standard acceptance letter the Dean hand-wrote, "You have caused some concern with faculty members. Law school will be a full-time job for you."

It turned out to be easy for Doug – he graduated one of the tops in his class. His biggest problem was needing to invest three years there. Doug wanted to double up his class load and get out early...but that was forbidden.

Indeed, Doug was a determined student. He'd study in an empty classroom, and he sat so still the motion detector would think the room was empty and turn the lights out. Doug would wave his arms and back on the lights would go.

In another marathon study session, Doug and his friend Bert drank large quantities of that cola with double the caffeine.

Doug: It turned our ears bright red.

After graduating, Doug set his sites on Chicago. He saved money by sharing a studio apartment with a good guy. It looked just like a dorm – they had two twin beds and one small room. Good guy was out of town weeks at a time, and Doug shipped off packets of mail for him.

Good guy, in a letter: While I appreciate what you're doing, you don't have to send me the supermarket inserts. Also, please don't send me the flyers from under the door.

Doug to me: Well, he said he wanted me to mail him everything.

Doug's parrot died, so Doug and I went to a famous Chicago graveyard and buried the little bird not too far from a railroad tycoon.

During this era, Doug identified himself in the third person. "What Doug Brackitt thinks is as follows:"

Doug should always be the driver rather than a passenger. If I'm at the wheel, he says things like, "Oh. See, you took a left turn. But if you'dve gone right, you'dve avoided all this traffic, and now it's going to take us a lot longer."

Two-year-old Ryan had these small stuffed animals, and he named each one after family members. Ryan called two of them Uncle Doug.

Doug got a good job as a prosecutor for the City of Chicago's traffic court. He processed about 800 cases a day – no exaggeration.

Defendant: Your honor, I got rid of the tinted glass on my car – here's a picture.

Doug, looking at the photo: Sir, your windows are rolled down – I can tell.

Defendant: What? You're kidding me.

Doug then started his own practice, and he advertised it with zero dollars. How? He named his law firm so it came up first in the yellow pages. Here's the three-part story:

1) That first spot was already taken by, "A FELLOW WHO'S AN ATTORNEY."

2) Doug topped "Fellow" by naming his practice "A ABLE ATTORNEY." This was grammatically challenged, but it pulled in business.

3) The next year, Doug got out-positioned by a law firm with the name "Aah." It turned out that was fine, because Al was calling Doug home to St. Louis – they would build a law practice together with him.

Hold it! First, we have to stop at a popular Chicago dance club in June, 1992. There, Doug's life changed forever and for better, because he met a Filipino nurse named Peggy. Three years later, they married, and now they're the happy parents of two girls.

Before Doug and Peggy tied the knot, they went through the pre-marriage classes that the church gave, and they took a compatibility test. They flunked it.

Doug will make a point, and instead of asking for agreement from Peggy, he'll stick his palm out for her to smack it – in that unspoken '70s way. If Peggy agrees, she'll casually slap his hand. I think they're the only two people still doing that.

6) 1994-98 32-36 Success

The law practice really picked up. One of Doug's clients had an alcoholic seizure in front of the judge.

Doug and Peggy moved into a new house, and they opened a box of dishes Doug brought from Chicago four years earlier – dirty dishes.

Mom: I washed them and they were fine.

7) 1999- 37- Reentertainment

Doug came into town, and we watched old tapes of the Clarence Thomas Supreme Court confirmation hearings – I have 20 hours of it.

Websites sell a lot of 1970s memorabilia, and Doug is buying most of it. He recently re-began collecting baseball cards and beer cans. Also, Doug's still trying to find this out-of-print book written about the restaurant chain he cooked at. He put in a search request at a popular online book source.

Doug: Every time I go to that site it says, "We have been unable to find your book. Do you want us to continue looking?" I'm like, "You're darned right I do. Keep searching."

So, what's the next stage for Doug – Utah farmer? Probably not, because whatever he gets involved with combines with something from his past. Here's my guess: Doug will teach his daughters to be the world's youngest authorities on 1970s bands.

7.7 Summer days

Ryan

Me: Does it get hot at the day camp?

Ryan, bugging his eyes: Puh ho, yeah!

Me: Do you like to swim there?

Ryan: Yeah. Yesterday I dived into the deep end, and my nostrils exploded.

In the yard, Ryan took the lid off the sandbox turtle, turned it over, poured water and sand into it, and made his own beach.

Jimmy

Me: Are you and Andy having fun at Gwen's?

Jimmy: Yes.

Me: Can you tell me more about it?

Jimmy: No, 'cause you tied my shoes too tight.

Me: So Gwen doesn't take you into the park if it's raining a little?

Jimmy: Yeah.

Me: Yes, she does, or yes, she doesn't?

Jimmy: Yes.

Andy

Gwen has a good dog named Odin. He's a big help during daycare, because the little tykes love to pass the time by petting him, and he doesn't mind getting his tail pulled. Also, he's about the same age as Andy, so they have a lot in common.

Jimmy: Today, Odin took a drink out of the toilet.

Me: Was Gwen mad at him?

Jimmy: Oh hooh, was she.

Gwen said that sometimes she tells the kids to "shoosh," and now Andy calls her Shoosh.

Jack

I coined the phrase, "It's like an oven outside."

7.8 Trip to VirtuAction Amusement Park

I took the two older kids to the big virtual reality amusement park in the Loop. Here's the story on that.

8:15 am. Preparations

I got the kids ready, and we dropped off Andy with Gwen. Andy is still learning the regular world, and he's not ready for the virtual kind yet.

While getting into the minivan, Jimmy avoided getting his dew-soaked shoes on the driver's seat. That's one of my few rules, because wet pants change my whole mood.

Back at home, I gave Ryan his donuts, and he had them with a glass of diet root beer.

Ryan: At the park, can I be in charge of the chips?

9:10 am. Driving there

Ryan, pointing: That's where Nan works.

Jimmy: There?

Ryan: Not the warehouse. The tall building. She's an accountant.

Jimmy: Have they got a bank up there?

Ryan: Nobody knows.

Jimmy: This one girl in my class, she's getting married.

Ryan: Really? How old is she?

Jimmy: Six. Her Mom gave her permission.

10:00 am. Arrival

I parked in a lot, and the parking fee was ultimately \$20.25.

This amusement park is in the fashionable part of town, inside a building. The good part of this: They're limited by code to holding only a certain number of people, so it's not overcrowded inside. There are about three rides on each floor.

We went to Goblin's Maze. We each sat in cars, put on our headsets, and looked on ahead to an animated and spooky world – it was like we were living inside a 1972 Saturday morning cartoon. ...

It's also notable that we each became a goblin. I turned to Jimmy next to me and he looked back at me as a little green creature – true! We flew on these batlike-dragons and searched for this pathetic goblin who had fallen into a well. Ryan found the elfie and rescued him.

As the above shows, these weren't typical "ride then get off" attractions. We were put in competitive situations. Another example: We were in an underwater rover, and we had to rescue virtual reality soldiers trapped in a deep-sea station. I'm sorry to report we failed, and we left our comrades to deal with the giant urchins. But you'll be glad to know that we escaped safely.

They had a game that pretended to give us an electric shock, but it just shook our hands fast.

11:30 am. Lunch

We went out to the car and ate in the minivan.

Me: Where's my cell phone?

Sudden panic! I had dropped it somewhere. We went to guest relations, asked about it, and the lady came out with something behind her back.

Lady: Can you describe the phone for me?

Me: Yes, it's a black phone. It's kinda...larger than most phones, and it's got the flap thing on it, yes.

Lady: Where do you think you dropped it?

Me: On the fifth floor – no! It was on the one, the twisty turny ride.

Lady: OK, here it is.

Me: Yes! My phone! Thank you.

I dunno...with those answers of mine, I wouldn't have given me the phone.

We went on a few more rides, then the kids asked to go home and watch cartoons. They'd had enough virtual reality games, and they wanted animators to do all the unreality for them.

1:30 pm. Returning

Ryan was on the phone with his Nan.

Ryan: We're done – we'll be home about 20 minutes. Hey Jim, that's the building we used to live in. It's actually four buildings, and they're all connected.

Jimmy: What did you do there?

Ryan: We swam, and there's a restaurant –

Me: Aren't you still on the phone with Nan?

Ryan: Oh yeah. Nan?

7.9 Chicago Profile: the Loop

Introduction

Me: Jimmy, you need to use the bathroom before we leave.

Jimmy: I don't have to go.

Me: But we're driving to a place that doesn't have bathrooms.

Jimmy: Where's that?

Me: The Loop.

Jimmy: Whoah.

The Loop is...

~ as tall as it is wide.

~ blessed with a cool nickname: the Loop.

~ the land of no land – the terrain is all streets, sidewalks, and intersections.

~ visually impressive – a tight conglomeration of buildings, river, drawbridges, boats, cars, and trains.

~ filled with over a million people every business day.

~ most like itself when there are snow flurries blowing around. Employees are bundled and moving quickly, human and street traffic are engaged in controlled jostling, and exhaust is visible from cars and buses.

~ well lit at night. In the afternoon, it feels like daytime.

~ an excitingly glum experience.

~ louder than one would think, because there's lotsa traffic, and the sounds bounce off buildings.

~ historic, depending on the area. But the Loop isn't there to preserve its oldness. It's there to get business done.

Hold it: Where is the history behind why it's called the Loop? There's a square loop of elevated trains tracks inside of downtown. It goes like this:

LAKE	STREET
W	W
E	A
L	B
L	A
S	S
*	H
VAN	BUREN**

There are numerous subsections in the Loop – sometimes they're packed together (like Jewelers Row on Wabash street and the Financial District), and other times they're "together in spirit" (like fast food restaurants). Here is a collection of subsection names. Put the word "area" after most of these:

1970s dull corporate

College

Commodities trading
Fancy lakefront corporate
Financial District
Government
Jewelers Row
Library
Loft condo
Michigan Avenue shopping
Museum
Newer hotel
Old hotel
Old warehouse
Post Office
Riverfront office
Run-down bar
State Street shopping
Theater District
Tourist/fun/family theme restaurant
Train station

Advertising

Many years ago, there was a giant cigarette billboard with a guy's face, and out of his mouth billowed real smoke rings. There's justifiable criticism about cigarette advertising, but...c'mon! I support smoke rings.

People

Most of the Loop's white-collar workers are younger, because the older ones move to the suburbs and find jobs out there.

Chicago has a huge stock market, but it's more for livestock. They have active trading pits, and traders bet on how much cattle and commodities (like wheat) will sell for in the future. They have a rigid social hierarchy that uses colored waist-length jackets (smocks?) to distinguish the top people from the in-betweens, and the hard workers. Many of the top-level men have hair weaves.

In the nice weather, people eat their lunches on whatever outside steps and ledges they can find.

In the 1970s, a lot of independent Loop diners served egg sandwiches, so people could eat breakfast while they walked to work. The chains have replaced them.

Pedestrians have the following expression: "I'm getting through the day. The Loop is primarily set up for work, so I'm here without my family and

lifetime friends. Ergo, I don't have much reason to be smiling-happy, but I'm OK."

Buildings

The "building landscape" is a patchwork of old/new, granite/brick, low-rise/high-rise, thin/wide. Any long walk in the Loop gives me something I hadn't noticed before.

Buildings near the lake and along the river are clean and crisp. Chicago's high-profile areas have a reputation for stunning architecture, so developers would receive a lotta criticism if they cheapened out.

It was a sunny day, and these raindrops fell on me. Soapy raindrops. (?) I looked up, and there were window washers.

Jimmy: Now we're in the big part of the city. That building goes up into the clouds. This seems odd to me. I like it on the country side of the city.

Chicago has these 1900-era tunnels connecting every block in the Loop – 50 miles worth. In 1992, river water burst into a tunnel, and it flooded hundreds of building basements in the Loop. Many companies had their big computers on the below-ground levels, and it was a mess.

Old buildings

In 1885, Chicago constructed the world's first skyscraper – nine stories tall. Previously, the outside walls supported a building, but Chicago developed the now-familiar skeletal frame, and up-up-up everything went.

I would have thought that during the recent economic boom, all the old buildings would've been torn down or rehabbed. But it's not the case: There are plenty of structures that look 1900s, yet they certainly aren't national landmarks and haven't been rehabbed – they're gracefully getting more worn down each year.

Numerous older buildings have names carved into the granite, and they use old words like Typewriter and Carbide.

A bank of lights shines onto the Wrigley Building and keeps it gleaming all night long.

St. Peter's Church is more like a corporate building – one of numerous structures right next to each other. It used to be a movie theater.

Newer buildings

One of the glass box 1960s buildings was given a new facade on the first three floors. They made the lower exterior look new/modern and kept the upper floors dull/old. The trick worked – it all looks new.

Many newer buildings have truly, truly bad sculptures in their lobbies.

An example of how Chicago operates: Beginning in the 1930s, the Lindbergh Beacon "beaconed" over a tall building in the Loop. It could be seen for hundreds of miles, and it helped pilots navigate. In the 1960s, these much taller apartments/condos went in near the beacon, and the light was swooping into residences and driving high-rise people crazy. In the early 1980s, the beacon was taken down, and Chicago again showed its preference for development over tradition.

New buildings

One building has a "rooftop antennae farm." I regret seeing common terms like "farm" applied to something unrelated, like communications equipment. A farm has cows and pigs! If they want to put animals on their rooftop farm, then it's OK.

I was at a Loop intersection, and I saw two construction workers with hard hats standing across the street from this high-rise being built. They were pointing at the structure, holding blueprints (or whatever they are now) and discussing something of importance. Construction drama in action.

The new post office operates 24 hours. People professionals are behind counters every moment. Right now, in fact.

Elevators

In one giant old building, Al Capone would be driven in his car into the freight elevator, lifted up, and then he'd get out on the appropriate floor.

I was going up an elevator at 5:00, and several "done for the day" professionals got on.

Me: I'm sorry, this elevator's going up.

Lady: In this building, you get on any elevator that's working.

These days, routing people through different elevators is a big thing. On one occasion, I parked in a garage on the fourth floor and...

1) went up the elevator to their skyway floor – 8. I walked through a bridge into their hotel/shopping/office area and...

2) took an elevator to 15. Then I walked around the corner and...

3) boarded an elevator going to 25. Everyone asked why I was there, and I was ashamed.

Some of the old buildings still have human elevator operators.

Hotels

Many hotels have long names to prove how opulent they are. Instead of the Hallard Hotel, it's the Towering Gardens Midwest at the Chicago Lakefront Hotel & Conference Center Hallard. The longer the name the more they charge.

There's a turn-of-the-century hotel that's been converted into a parking garage. True! It still has the old style windows, but I can see cars inside. Senior citizen husband: My dear, for our 50th anniversary we should go back to Chicago and stay in that wonderful hotel where we had our honeymoon. Wife: Yes, and we'll sleep in our car.

Museums

The big art museum has two metal lions on the front steps, and they get sat on (tourist photo), decorated with wreaths around their necks, and so forth. Jimmy and I drove by, and the front entrance was under construction. One of the big metal felines was in a temporary fenced-in area, and someone put a sign up: "Please do not feed the lion."
Jimmy: Ha!

Parks

This guide took us on a tour of Chicago, and we were at the famous Buckingham Fountain.

Guide: They change the color of the water in the evening.

Me: Don't they just project different colored lights onto it?

Guide: No, but that would be a good idea.

Oh sheeze, they change the lights, not the water.

Grant Park

It's on the near south side close to the lake. The hippies and yuppies resided there during the infamous 1968 Democratic National Convention. Politicians were staying across the street in Michigan Avenue hotels ("overlooking Grant Park and rioters"). The peace lovers stormed the hotels, and Hubert Humphrey took on three yuppies at once.

The point is, the "whole world is watching" riots didn't take place near the convention hall (a mile away) but in front of nice hotels. Let's get the facts straight on our Chicago embarrassments.

Residences

People will live in a high-rise named after a nightclub that inhabited the building in the early 1990s. I'd hesitate before living in "The Big Cahuna Lofts."

My friend, Kyle Edwards, moved into a loft right in the Loop. It's an area with a lot of regular corporate buildings, and some are getting rehabbed as condos. Looking at the outside of an office-turned-condo, the only notable difference is balconies – they're attached all up and down the building. Standing on the balcony in the Windy City makes for a memorable experience.

Streets

Parking meters charge 50 cents for every 10 minutes.

When sidewalks are wet, more smells get bounced around.

Every so often, people give away free samples, like shampoos and mints. Sometimes, a person in a gorilla suit stands on the corner and hands out fliers for a store.

A busy city has thousands of service vehicles taking care of the businesspeople – stuff just doesn't magically appear. But – where to park those vans to make the deliveries, pick up the overnight packages, etc.? ...

Around 1910, the city wisely/strangely decided to raise the main streets – to put them on the second floor. The ground level streets were renamed "Lower ...," like "Lower Michigan," and became dedicated to service traffic. They're used by delivery vans, construction vehicles, garbage trucks, and so forth. Also, cabbies who want to get through the Loop fast take the lower roads.

In the late 1960s, the most famous abstract artist ever gave the Loop a 50-foot-high outdoor metal sculpture that's "hard to explain what it is, but it's OK." Teens like to skateboard on it.

State Street, that nice street

Ryan: Why isn't State Street shaped like one of the states?

Quick notes:

~ State Street has a lot of department stores and apparel places.

~ A giant "one city block" department store has a row of street-level windows. During the holiday season, they'll use each window to "show and tell" a story like Cinderella. So, she's a scrubwoman in the first window, and a queen in the last.

In 1979, State Street was turned into a mostly-pedestrian mall, but this was a mega-mistake. In the mid-1990s, car traffic was brought back. The city gave State Street a 1910s look, with gas-esque streetlamps, wrought iron subway entrances and brass fixtures. It's a "must-walk."

Theater district

There are numerous movie theaters in one concentrated area, and they got run down in the 1960s/70s. Reason: Cinemas sprang up outside the city limits, so suburbanites didn't need to see movies downtown. Bruce Lee became the king of the old theaters, and tragically, at least three were torn down. One of them was replaced by...nothing. After they demolished it, a recession/building glut hit, and it's still a vacant lot.

In the late 1990s, the existing theaters were mega-cleaned up and restored.

Transportation

A water taxi takes people on the Chicago River to whatever destination they choose...within reason.

The Loop is packed with vehicles. Three percent of the time someone is honking within earshot.

West

The near west side is/was known for soup kitchens, church-run rehab centers, old factories and big, yet squat, office buildings. Many structures are being turned into loft space. These changes must be difficult for convicts just getting out after 10-to-15 year stretches.

Ex-con: OK, here's where the old bar was. What? It's a mountain bike store! Who rides mountain bikes in the Loop? Great balls of fire!

7.10 Ryan's flight to Grandma's

Ryan has been flying by himself down to Grandma's since he was 4 1/2, so he's quite an old pro at this.

Me: In a few days, you're taking the plane to Grandma's.

Ryan: Yeah! Can I bring my barbells?

That day

Ryan woke up, and an hour later, he got into bed again.

Me: Are you going back to sleep?

Ryan: Hey, I've got to rest up for my trip to Grandma's.

Me: The flight is 10 hours from now.

Me: Jimmy, would you want to go flying down to Grandma's by yourself?

Jimmy: No, 'cause I'd be too scared.

Me: How scared?

Jimmy: Fifty eight hundred and a million one hundred and eighty eight sixty six one hundred and three plus a million.

His flight was at 9:00 pm, so we wisely left for the airport two hours early.

Me, on the drive down: So, you're fine with flying.

Ryan: I'm just nervous the plane will run out of gas.

We got near the airport around 7:40 and stopped at Stackers fast-food. I checked the flight itinerary and was surprised it said an "0717" departure date instead of "0716."

I thought: Today must be July 17th, and I've been wrong all day about that.

Then I checked my computer calendar, and sure enough: It was July 16th. We were a day early! Uh oh. Big uh oh.

Me: Ryan, we've gotta get to the airport. Bring your food.

Errrh! It was a Friday night, there were all those travelers, and I'd have to get a flight booked for an unaccompanied minor child. I couldn't wait until the next night to take him when his ticket was right, because heck no – we were here. Getting to someplace is a big deal in Chicago. We pulled into our airport's new parking garage and hustled over to the ticket counter.

I explained my predicament to the ticket agent (TA), but I knew from experience we could only do what that clunky green-screen computer allowed.

TA: The boy's an unaccompanied minor, and I don't think we can get him on an hour before departure.

Ryan: Thanks a lot, Dad.

TA tapped away at the keyboard and...the computer gave its blessing. What a relief! TA seemed disappointed we got the flight, because that disproved his prediction. Tough!

Me: Ryan, I'm glad we made it.

Ryan: Yeah! And I didn't have to do anything. I just stood there.

We went through the metal detectors and sat at our Gate A-11 waiting area. I filled out Ryan's flying-by-himself tags, and he pinned them on. They looked like a fishing license hanging off him. The boy watched TV, and I read one of the newspapers that was lying around.

Ryan saw his plane arrive, and we waited in the pre-board area. He got last-minute jitters, so I told him some positive airline safety statistics that did nothing for him. But his fears passed nonetheless.

Me: You brought your bathing suit?

Ryan: Yeah.

Me: That's good, because you're going to be swimming at Grandma's every day. He gave me an approving look.

Flight attendant: We'll take your son on the plane first.

When it came time for him to go, Ryan gave me a big hug and a half-punch in the stomach.

I watched Ryan walk up the steps until his feet were out of sight, then I walked to the large windows and looked at the plane itself. I cupped my eyes up to the glass and tried to see Ryan sitting inside one of the little plane windows. I didn't spot him, but I still waved – maybe he could see me. About 10 minutes later, the vehicle that pushes the jet back did so, and his plane rolled out of sight. I said to the window: Good luck, Ryan.

That night I called Ryan long distance – everything went fine.

Me to Ryan: Did you drink a soda on the flight?

Ryan: Yeah.

Me: Peanuts? How many bags of peanuts did you eat?

Ryan: One. I left the other one on the seat.

Me: Good deal.

Then Mom came on the extension.

Mom: Johnnny, I didn't have enough cash for the cab ride back here, but the driver took a check.

Me: Wow – he's the first cabbie in history who did that.

Mom: Ryan, it's time for bed now.

Ryan: For what?

Grandma: Bed, B - E - D. Do you want a snack first?

I realized they didn't need me on the phone.

Ryan flew back a week later, and he said he had a good time. Ryan went to Al and Doug's law office, and he did some filing for his Uncle Al. This surprised me, because I thought Al turned down any cases that involved paperwork.

Me: I hear you talked with Uncle Al about you two being the oldest.

Ryan: Yeah. He was always ready to nail you guys. He said it was the worst thing in his life.

Me: You think he's right?

Ryan: Oh yeah. Every job will be easy compared to that.

Me: So, you traveled around with Uncle Al?

Ryan: Yeah. Man, Dad, he goes everywhere, and you never go anywhere – except for the yard, or, like, you'll go to the grocery store.

Me: So you'd want to go, say whitewater rafting?

Ryan: Yeah! Or hang-paragliding.

Me: Your Uncle Al will take you to do all that.

Ryan: Yeah. When I'm 18, he's going to give me his motorcycle.

Me: Really?

Ryan: Well, I'll talk him into it. Besides, he'll be too old to ride it.

Ryan said he and his Uncle Doug have an ongoing conflict over Doug's parrot, Sylvester. The bird chewed through Ryan's videogame cord, and this cost Ryan \$15.

Ryan: Can you call Uncle Doug and tell him he owes me \$15?

Me, picking up the cell phone: OK.

Me: Doug – there's a problem with you, Ryan, and a videogame cord.

Doug: Yeah, I heard the kid wants money. Put him on.

Ryan: Uncle Doug –

Doug: Ryan, your videogame cord made Sylvester sick! We took him to the vet, and it cost \$15 to make him better. So, we're even.

Ryan was puzzled a moment, but he quickly recovered.

Ryan: Unh unh, Uncle Doug, you owe me \$15!

7.11 July 4th weekend

We took a July 4th weekend trip to St. Louis.

7/2 Friday

On the drive down...

Jimmy: Mom, how much further?

Karen: Three hours.

Jimmy: Can't you go any faster?

Jimmy: Is this summer?

Karen: It certainly is.

Jimmy: Are we going to lick our hands and celebrate the summer?

Karen: Huh?

Jimmy: Yeah, that's the song.

Me: I think that's "lift our hands."

At the rest stop, we had an impromptu picnic.

Me: Jimmy, stay on the grass.

Jimmy: I am. I'm getting Mom flowers.

Karen loved her cloves.

I looked back at Andy, and he gave me one of Ryan's well-known expressions. I'm always amazed how siblings can put the same looks on their faces.

7/3 Saturday

Brothers Doug, Al and I went to the major league baseball game. They can get into the stadium club, so we watched the game from there. The club has a posh restaurant with white tablecloths, expensive wines – everything I wouldn't expect in a ballpark. So, we're getting into the spirit of baseball, and the hotdogs are an inch long and have toothpicks in them.

After the posh-ball experience, we went down to their regular stadium seats, and this performer was shooting hotdogs (real ones) into the stands – using this sort of *frank gun shooter thing*. I stood up to catch a red-hot, but Al and Doug sat glued to their seats – and put annoyed looks on their faces. Sports purists have to dislike anything the crowd enjoys.

Afterwards, we hooked up with Al's friend-since-childhood Luke Westerhold. Notes on Luke: Meeting him is like encountering a bizarre comedic movie character who just walked off the screen. In the course of a conversation, he'll probably give me a...

~ conspiracy theory even extremists would consider far-reaching.

~ birth date of anyone he's speaking about – because he has them memorized.

~ song from a 1960s TV show, but only the background music.
Brother Al: There's that part in your head that prevents you from saying everything in your mind. Luke doesn't have that.

We all went to the big St. Louis July 4th fair held at the Arch. Since you didn't attend this year, I'll give you my take on it.

Half the fair is families. They're eating/drinking, listening to live music, watching the fireworks, walking through rows of handmade items for sale (including paintings of movie stars on glossed up wooden boards).

The other half of the fair: People having their excuse to get falling down drunk.

Speaking of that, I accompanied Brother Doug to a free outdoor rock concert by a band that hit the charts once in 1979, and they're still getting mileage out of that song. We were standing on a sloping grass hill with the stage at the bottom, and we were packed in with hundreds of sweaty, shirtless guys – ew. The only concert-goers who got elbow room were those passed out on the grass – everyone jammed around them. Next time I go to an outdoor rock concert, I'll pretend I'm zonked and stretch out.

7/4 Sunday

It's July 4th, and today Andy celebrated his own independence day: He took his first few steps! For the record, he's 11 months and 21 days old.

Jimmy and I wanted to watch fireworks, so we went to a community production (rather than the big fair – a little too much for us). Everyone had lawn chairs, but we hanged at the outdoor kids tubes at a fast-food restaurant. A little girl there tried to kiss Jimmy.

Me: Why was she doing that?

Jimmy: I don't know – I told her not to.

The girl's older brother was doing some dramatic climbing.

Grandmother: Don't do that, or you'll break your head again.

The boy rolled his eyes.

Me to the grandmother: He broke his head?

Grandmother: Yes, when he was two. He fell and had a fracture.

I thought: Sheez – that guy will be told, "you might crack your head again" until he's 70 years old.

Jimmy and I sat on the tubes and watched the fireworks. Afterwards...

Me: We had a good time.

Jimmy: I had a sweaty time.

On Monday, we thanked Grandma for everything and drove home.

8. August

8.1 Timeline

Doug and Peggy just had little Ava. She's healthy and pretty...and Peggy's doing great – good deal all around! The word is Karen and I are in the running as godparents, and of course, we'd be honored. Any child would benefit from my religious guidance.

Me: Can I hear about your first day of kindergarten?

Jimmy: Not tellin'.

I turned 36 years old today. That makes me 252 in dog years.

For a birthday present, Jimmy made me flavored ice cubes out of diet soda.

8.2 Andy at 13 months

Andy ran with his little football.

Karen, announcing: He's running around the toys, heading to the kitchen gate and...touchdown!

When Andy sleeps, he's thinking as a baby, and when he wakes up, he's still thinking as a baby. Yes, it's obvious, but I still wanted to mention it.

Karen was heading out the door and smelled the baby.

Karen: Honey there's poo-poo.

Me, half listening: I won't respond to that nickname.

Karen: What?

Me: "Honey poo-poo." Let's give me a better nickname than that.

Karen: No – the baby poo-poo'd.

Me: Oh! Sorry.

We stopped by the Lorenzie family's nice home in Evanston – a near north town. Paul and Maja are artistic, and they have an energetic daughter who's a real match for Ryan. Tammy is like his long lost twin sister. For years, they've had snowball fights, yard games, and so on. He gets a red face and so does she. He was missing a front tooth and so was she.

8.3 Circle update

The other day, friend Lee Kirby took me to an exotic vegetarian restaurant. Their dishes are promoted to cure various illnesses, like a cold or flu. I support their doing this! However, if they had a soup for bunions, I'd leave. I don't need to see people soaking.

A quick backgrounder on Lee: He's an artist who follows many creative endeavors, including cartoon drawing, western art painting, and improvisational acting. Someone is much more likely to make a movie about Lee's life ("he rejected the system and went his own way") than mine ("he folded immediately").

Lee was assigned to draw a caricature of this famous, grizzled talk show host, and Lee made him look like a bum. The assistant producer questioned this. Lee: Well, that's what he looks like.

Quick notes: Lee...

- ~ is a big fan of Jack LaLanne. Lee does a fine impersonation of him.

- ~ saves me from learning certain topics, because he knows them. For example, Lee is an expert on the comic book character The Flash.

8.4 Trip to St. Valentine's Castle

We went to this interesting amusement park in the suburbs. Quick notes: St. Valentine's Castle...

- ~ is in the suburbs (oh, I said that), and set inside a forest.
- ~ has a red hearts look. The kiosks and concession stands are red mini-castles with a candy-ish feel about them.
- ~ makes complete sense to little kids. "This is where the baby Valentine lives and works."
- ~ would be a spectacular location for a movie set in the early 1960s (when it was built). It has an overall feel that's "kitschy without intending to be."
- ~ has a low admission price, and inexpensive food/drinks.
- ~ puts a lot of heart into everything – no pun intended.

Again, Chicagoland's overpopulation works to an advantage, because a classic amusement park like this keeps going strong. In smaller cities, these imaginative, older playlands have been replaced by super-fast-and-big roller coaster parks. I consider us lucky.

Four of us went: Ryan, Jimmy, friend Marco (the other grownup) and me.

9:05 am

Jimmy, Ryan and I drove over to Marco's, and Jimmy got on the cellular phone to give him advance notice.

Jimmy: Arco? Jack, that's Dad, and us we're being out front.

10:15 am

On the drive out...

Me: They've got a place where Valentine grants all love wishes.

Ryan: Ew!

Jimmy: I'm gonna ask Valentine for a golden ring for my mom.

We were on a two-lane road outside downtown Algonquin, IL. I passed in a no passing zone and was pulled over. The cop was nice and didn't ticket me for this, but he did cite me for not having proof of insurance.

Ryan: Oh, man. Let's go home.

11:00 am

We made it into the park. Our first ride was the sky lift, and it took us over the forest.

Afterwards, me to Jimmy: Did you think you were going to fall?

Jimmy: Pfffffft. [Translation: "No, it was easy."]

Ryan: I almost got a branch.

Marco: Oh man.

Me: Ryan, what did you like about the roller coaster?

Ryan: Everything. I wish it would've gotten stuck, though.

Marco: Oh boy.

Ryan and Marco went on the swings, and Jimmy got on this little kids' futuristic go-around-in-circles ride with various vehicles – helicopter, spaceship, etc. A lot of kids were on this ride, and the age groups showed notable differences in behavior:

~ An 18-month-old had no real understanding of what she was on.

~ A three-year-old was totally into it. He had the whole ride under his control.

~ Our five-year-old was sort of bored, looking around behind him.

I put on a Viking hat.

Ryan: Dad, that's you –ugly, disgusting and metal-headed.

While Ryan ran off to catch a nearby ride, I stood in line for refreshments, and Marco sat on a bench with Jimmy.

Me: What do you guys want?

Jimmy: Cherry snow cone.

Marco: Lemonade for me, please.

Jimmy: Oh, I'll have a lemonade, too.

Me: You don't want a snow cone?

Jimmy: Oh yeah, I do.

I left my cellular phone on the bench (eegh), and this nice kid told me about it.

Ryan: Dad, you're so forgetful.

Me: You wouldn't forget a phone because you'd be talking on it all the time.

Ryan: Yeah. Oh yeah, can I make a call?

3:00 pm

It was time to depart.

In the car...

Ryan: Dad, weren't we going home?

Me: Yeah.

Ryan: Then why aren't we there yet?

8.5 Computer

I had this troublesome computer software program. It always flashing me warnings about how badly it was performing. I didn't have sympathy, because I didn't even use the thing. So, I removed it file by file from my hard drive. Now, it's alerting me even more – it can't work right with all those missing parts.

When I had this other computer problem, I contacted friend Matt Benjamin, because he has the deepest PC knowledge of anyone I've ever met. Matt takes me into depths of the operating system that are known only to him and the world's richest man.

I own this old laptop, and only one company makes the power cord (model number "ATW-38-H") for it. Three online retailers carry these cords, and they were each saying the same thing: They were sold out of this cord, but they expected a shipment on the 15th. ...

It got to be the 30th, and still nobody had the cords. So, I took matters into my own hands and called the manufacturer directly – I wanted to see what was going on. Surprisingly, I was immediately connected to the director of manufacturing.

Me: Thanks for talking with me. I'm just checking on the status of the ATW-38-Hs.

Director, flustered: We're sending them out in a week. What retailer are you with?

Me: Oh, I'm an end user – I just want one.

Director: An end user! Oh, goodbye.

I had a pop culture question. So, I got on the Internet and wrote to a fanatic on the subject (there's at least one for every media phenomenon). I got an answer back in 20 minutes! This fan is working 24 hours a day.

Computer screen message: This machine was not shut down properly.

Me: Hey, you're the one who decided to crash.

8.6 Champaign wedding

Karen and I drove two hours south to Champaign, IL for a wedding. The happy couple was/is Chloe Goodfriend and Guy Kitterman. Jimmy and Andy stayed at our house with Grandma Martha.

Saturday morning

We drove down Interstate 57, and that took us close to the town of Brace, IL. This little no-stoplight community is a major part of our family's past, because that's where Dad grew up. We didn't stop, because our family isn't living there now. ...

We have lots of Brace stories, and I'm saving them for another time – maybe when we have a family reunion there. That's when I'll tell much more about my Grandma and Grandpa – Dad's Mom and Dad. For now, I'll be totally inadequate and give you a few sentences on each of them.

Grandma was born in Iowa in the early 1900s. One hears that strong people are raised in Iowa, and this one certainly was. For example, Grandma didn't begin having children until she was 30, yet she had eight. Overall, Grandma lived enough events for three lives, and her strong faith got her through everything.

Grandma was and is the most religious person I've ever known. Soon after she passed away, I had the opportunity to tell a famous priest how much Grandma had done for the church, and how much her belief helped her. He said to me, "When your grandmother passed on, St. Peter took her by the arm and led her into the kingdom of God."

Grandpa was Brace's town doctor for 37 years, and he went on thousands of house calls in the middle of the night. Grandpa saved so many people that his contribution to the life of central Illinois cannot be overstated. When Brace celebrated 100 years of being a town, they dedicated their entire Centennial to Grandpa.

Writing this now, I'm struck by how courageous Grandpa was – he helped so many people under such difficult circumstances. Here, I fr three people – me, myself and I – in my 36-year-old life. And in 1943, my 36-year-old Grandpa was the only doctor in a remote farm community, curing a child and turning a mother's heartache into lifelong joy. Today, that mother is deceased. But when she passed on, her adult child was holding her hand, and that's all she ever asked for. Grandpa gave this to her.

Arrival in Champaign

We got to our motel. It was fine, but every time I turned on the TV, they'd blast this recorded message from their near-celebrity spokesman. He welcomed us, invited us to pay for movie channels, and said he might drop by unexpected.

Walking around Champaign

Champaign-Urbana is two towns placed side-by-side (I think), and don't ask me to tell you which is where.

Karen: We're in Urbana now.

Me: Hm.

Their university campus has an underground library. It goes like four stories straight into the ground, and it brings a new meaning to bookworm.

We went to an arty coffee shop. Every city has these, but the ones in college towns set the standard, because their patrons always have the best half-dead look. I tried hard to not disturb their repose, but when I put my thick porcelain cup and saucer into the bus tray it made a clatter, and five nonconformist heads slowly craned up from their books and fixed on me.

Since the early '80s there, a lot of the bad near-campus apartments have been torn down and replaced with better residences. I dunno...it's not quite a university without condemned student housing.

Wedding day

The wedding was held in a modern synagogue. More specifically, they tied the knot (or stomped the glass – new catch phrase) in the flowery courtyard on the side of the temple.

The wedding was first class and beautiful. I'm learning that a lot of social dynamics take place at weddings. For example, singles get introduced. That "match made in heaven" line should be changed to "match made at a wedding."

...

On this occasion, a nice single lady (one side's friend) was introduced to a single man (the other side's friend). This was planned for some time, in a "We ought to get them together – I think they'd really like each other" way.

I think about the parents a lot at weddings, because they're accomplishing something big. The bride and groom represent most of the parents' hopes and dreams, and this is a giant step forward for the family.

The reception was great – just like the wedding. Nobody did the chicken dance, so maybe that era is ending.

I extended my compliments to their wedding band, partly because they played soft music during dinner. I dislike how some bands think they're the main attraction, and they need to blast noise while guests are trying to talk across a round table. Of course, everyone cried when I took the microphone and sang, "Daddy's Little Girl."

Going home

We thanked those who invited us to this excellent wedding, and we drove home. When we returned, Jimmy and Andy had a sign up: "Hi Mom and Dad."

Karen: Jimmy, I really liked seeing that sign.

Jimmy: Yeah, I forgot to put a heart on there. Next time you go away I'll put two hearts on there.

8.7 Games

Ryan

Ryan completely stumped me at indoors hide 'n seek. He made it appear he was hiding in an obvious place – he put pillows under a blanket in front of the couch. When I finally jostled the spot, I was like the guard in a prison movie.
Me: Wha? Pillows!

Ryan and I have many sidewalk races, and each finish line is the next street corner up. If I overtake Ryan he'll yell, "Tiiiiime out!" I'll stop, and he'll tell me one of the following problems:

- 1) He's out of breath.
- 2) His leg hurts.
- 3) It's his stomach.

Then Ryan will suddenly take off running, pass yell, "Go!" and win.

Me: I've got a new strategy about how I'm going to catch you at tag tonight.

Ryan: Yeah, what.

Me: You know clockwise and counterclockwise?

Ryan: Everyone's known that for a million years.

Me: When I'm chasing you, I'm going to switch between the two, and I'm really going to confuse you.

Ryan: So many people have tried that on me.

Me: When I played little league, I was the worst one on the team.

Ryan: That's no surprise.

Ryan and I played checkers.

Me, upon winning a game: Oh yeah!

Ryan: Don't brag like that.

Me: What? You're always doing it.

Ryan: No, I just throw my fist in the air.

Another time I played Ryan, and I won a few games in a row.

Me: I'll let Jimmy help you.

Ryan: Oh man, am I that pitiful?

Jimmy

Jimmy: Mommy, do you remember when we played pirates?

Karen: Yes.

Jimmy: No you don't. Only I remember it.

Karen: Oh, OK, then I don't remember.

Jimmy: Daddy, do you remember when we played pirates?

Me: No, I don't.

Jimmy: That's right, 'cause only I remember it.

Me: See Karen, I got it right.

A ghost came into our living room.

Me: Mr. Ghost, don't scare me!

The ghost came up to me. I found out he was ticklish.

Jimmy founded a Jumping School for himself. He hops on the guestroom bed while watching TV, and it's my job to measure how high he bounces. Usually, Jimmy starts with traditional leaps forward and back, then he'll drop onto his backside and bounce himself up again. Jimmy's proud of his ability to stay on the bed.

Jimmy: This is the map to find the bad guys' hideout.

These bad guys disguised their map as the packing tape off a cardboard box.

Jimmy was working with connect blocks, and he made a Super Sound Attractor Retation.

Andy

Andy is enjoying his first steps into life as a little boy. We're playing "catch me" now. The first couple of times, it bewildered him. But now he's right into it. I went to catch Andy, and he grabbed a plastic bat and hit me repeatedly.

Jack

I found Ryan's kneepads, so now I'm much better at playing horsey. This is where I act like a horse. Yes, I'm doing this for the kids! I don't just trot around like a horse for nothing. Sometimes I do.

Family

Property-Go-Round

Jimmy and I play this ever-popular board game, but we created our own kids version of it. Basically, the money only goes up to \$20. Also, we'll cram five pieces of property onto one little space, because it helps Jimmy learn about Chicago real estate. Here are some tales of the game:

Me, picking up a card: Uh oh – you owe me a dollar.

Jimmy: A dollar! You cheated.

Me: Do you want to buy that gas station?

Jimmy: No.

Me: It's only 10 bucks, and you have a lot of money.

Jimmy: OK, I'll buy it.

Me: Then give the bank 10 dollars.

Jimmy: I quit.

Jimmy had some scrapes with the city and was assigned community service twice.

Me: Are you OK?

Jimmy: This time I'm just visiting.

Me: No, you're doing community service.

Jimmy: I'm visiting myself then.

Jimmy had a free building permit card, and I offered to buy it.

Jimmy: You'll have to give me a dollar.

Me: It's worth more than that.

Jimmy: Fine, I won't sell it to you.

Other games

Jimmy and Karen were playing Bingo and Jimmy won.

Jimmy: Bingo!

Karen: Yay, Bingo!

Jimmy: Mommy, only I can say Bingo.

Jimmy was working on the computer – making lotsa abstract drawings.

Jimmy: Ryan, it's your turn.

Ryan, seeing Jimmy's picture: Yikes!

The oldest started working, but then he discovered another abstract Jimmy picture.

Ryan: Yeesh!

And another Jimmy picture.

Ryan: Dah!

8.8 Mom's August visit

Ryan, Jimmy, and I went down to pick up Grandma Alice at the airport. I drove. Ryan, pointing to the sky: Hey, I think that's Grandma's plane.

We made it to the airport. Grandma's flight had a 35-minute delay, so I got pizza for the kids. Chicago recently announced they reduced prices on airport food. A slice of pizza used to be twice the size for \$4.50, and now it's half the size for \$2.25.

We were sitting in a row of chairs at the gate.

Ryan: I can lift these chairs up.

Me: Go ahead.

He struggled with the seats.

Ryan: Oh dang it, this thing's sharp. Here, OK. Oh man, my sore finger.

Jimmy: What does "cut to the chase" mean?

Me: It means, "Tell me what you're gonna tell me, and don't mess around."

Ryan: Jim doesn't understand that, believe me. Jim, did you understand what Dad said?

Jimmy: No.

Ryan: "Cut to the chase" is when someone's telling something, and they're saying all these things about something, but it's not really that thing. That's what it is. Did you understand that, Jim?

Jimmy: Yes.

And Jimmy punched me.

Ryan: I can't believe Grandma came up just to take care of Andy all week. Why would someone spend so much money just to fly and baby-sit?

Me: Grandma enjoys being up here.

Ryan: There has to be a catch to it.

And Grandma Alice arrived! Of course, we gave her big hugs.

Here's a random collection of "Grandma in Chicago" stories...

Ryan talked about how well he did at St. Valentine's Castle amusement park.

Ryan: Grandma, I threw three balls, I knocked these things over two times, and I got a toy.

Grandma: Did Jimmy play that?

Ryan: No, he can't gamble yet.

Grandma, Jimmy and I walked to the park. En route, Jimmy ran a little ways ahead, then he'd freeze like a statue. We'd tag him and off he'd go again.

We were going out, and I was searching for my shoes.

Mom: Johnny, just wear those.

Me: Mom, these are my slippers.

Mom: Oh, just wear them.

Jimmy: Man, why did Andy get a toy?

Me: Because he screamed. If you screamed you'd get a toy, too.

Mom: Oh, don't say that.

Mom updated me on her friends at home. One lady said her favorite coffee is brewed at her neighborhood gas station.

Mom had pork chops at the restaurant, and she got a foam container for it (no doggie bags these days). We were going to the car and we dropped the container – the chop almost fell out. In the minivan, Andy stomped on the container and busted it.

Mom: That pork chop has been through hell and back.

We took Mom to the airport, gave her big thanks and exchanged hugs. We'll see Grandma again soon.

8.9 Reading

Ryan

Ryan is so obsessed with his book, he walks through the entire house reading it.

Ryan: They had me read this thing on painters.

Me: That's interesting.

Ryan: Man. There were a lot of painters.

Me: You shouldn't wear sunglasses when you read.

Ryan: These are my reading sunglasses.

Jimmy

Jimmy likes to join in grownup conversations. Karen and I were talking about one of her favorite novelists.

Karen to me: I just really like how she writes.

Jimmy: No, I don't like it. I don't, no. I hate it.

We were reading a picture book of the Bible.

Jimmy: Moses was the one who held up the stick.

I was reading a kids book to Jimmy.

Jimmy: I'm going upstairs. You can finish it yourself.

Andy

I was reading Andy this fairy tale about a mermaid, and it said their life span is 300 years. Did the write pull that number out of the air?

Jack

The kids and I were reading a children's book. In it, there's a worm running a TV camera. That's something I've always wanted to do, and here I'm seeing a creepy-crawly doing it.

Talk

A rule of thumb with parenthood is: If the child is enjoying something that hasn't been completely accepted as good, then it must be bad. After Gutenberg invented the printing press, thousands of books came out. I'm sure parents said, "Son, books will ruin your brain! Kids today – why won't they sit by the fire and listen to tales anymore?"

8.10 St. Louis profile: Living

Baseball

I'm the world's worst baseball fan, and even I know that St. Louis is obsessed with their Cardinals. St. Louis has two Major League teams, yet a Chicago sports writer still said it: "St. Louis is second to none as a baseball town."

The city and team are woven into one. They cross over in conversation, social gatherings, romance, commerce, and all stages of life. Everyone always has something to say about the Cards.

Busch Stadium is tire-shaped, and that makes for a unique crowd sound. The cheers swirl out of the ballpark.

Cars

In St. Louis, every man, woman and child has a car.

Here's a typical St. Louis conversation:

Ron: How are you?

Tim: Fine.

Ron: How's your car?

Many St. Louisans...

~ identify themselves with their cars. For some, it's all they are.

~ park their cars backwards into spaces.

In any parking lot, a car fanatic will park his dream machine all by itself at a far end space – so he won't get damage from other cars. I once owned a big junkmobile, and I'd also stop at the far end. Then I parked my beastly car right next to the really nice one.

There are thousands of pickup trucks, and they're all different shapes and sizes. Some are very unfamiliar. They look...extraterrestrial.

More cars have bumper stickers.

Food

The best food in St. Louis is Italian, and the best Italian restaurants are in huge old houses. Typically, when the restaurant started (perhaps in the 1920s), tables were at the front of the home, and family lived in the back. Success came, so the family moved to another house, and customer tables went into the bedrooms.

Here is the town's #1 secret: St. Louis has the best pizza in the world. It's true! The pizza is definitely different – and fantastic. Two main reasons:

1) They don't use "boring and chewy" mozzarella cheese, but "zesty and rich" provolone cheese.

2) The crust is very thin.

There are several famous restaurant owners – very hands-on people. One fellow sold his place after many decades.

Me: So he wanted to finally retire.

Friend Jeff Larson: No, he wanted to invest more in his hairpiece.

Jobs

Here comes the worst part about St. Louis: Companies don't pay people enough money. The employers say lots of mumbo jumbo like, "When you compare the cost of living in St. Louis to other cities, most people here make more than the national average." Baloney!

Media

TV

TV news is a big part of St. Louisans' lives. In fact, for many years, STL had the highest-rated newscast in the country. Let's take each news segment and deliver some quick stories:

News

One anchorman sold drugs to an undercover officer and was imprisoned.

A man-woman anchor team was feuding, and someone from the station sent nasty notes about the woman to the newspaper. The team broke up.

Weather

A long-standing weathercaster suddenly saw thousands of dollars in her account – the bank had made a mistake. Unfortunately, she spent much of the money, couldn't pay it back, and got into a lot of trouble.

The #1 meteorologist in town was upset over a lost love. He took off in his airplane and dove it straight into the ground.

Sports

One sportscaster grabbed a coworker's arm and twisted it behind her. She was hurt and he was fired.

A sportscaster was close by when his friend beat a man so severely he later died.

Radio

Let's go around the dial at one of the largest AM stations in the country:

Morning: News, traffic, etc. One morning, the main traffic helicopter took off and crashed right in the water – because it was still tied to the launch pad. The crew was ultimately OK. ...

As a temporary replacement, they hired a copter pilot who had recently been in a bizarre situation. A lady passenger pulled a gun on him and demanded he land in a prison yard so her boyfriend could escape. The pilot wrestled the gun from her and shot her dead.

Mid-morning: They had a “phone-in your comments” show, and the host wisely paid little attention to these callers.

Host: Hello, what’s your question or comment?

Caller: They should tear down those sports stadiums and put in more parking lots.

Host: OK, thank you very much. Next call.

Afternoon: A witty radio host told shaggy dog stories and was by far the #1 celebrity in town. He was scuba diving in his backyard pool and died. It was sad – he was one of my Dad’s favorite people in town.

Evening: Sports is all the talk. They have the highest rated sports call-in show in the country, and they broadcast most of the town’s sporting events. When the legendary St. Louis broadcasters retire, their sons usually take over – proving that dynasties exist.

Late night: A radio anchor had the near-midnight shift. He had thousands of listeners, partly because he was a curmudgeon, and he gave callers a real tongue-lashing. But he’d have to plead for new people to phone in, because folks were scared.

Middle of the night: A radio anchor read entire news stories – three pages was no problem. He was inviting without trying to be that way, and it was nice hearing something other than clippy news reports.

Music

St. Louis is just another date for a touring rock band. The roadie writes “St. Louis” on tape on the stage floor so the band remembers where they are. The only thing the lead singer knows about St. Louis is that the town has an Arch. Singer to the crowd: Hey St. Louis! We’re gonna rock you over that big Arch! Crowd: [lighters]

One of St. Louis’ most popular singers had a hit pop song in the 1960s – it was about running around on the one you love. Ironically, in the 1980s the singer’s wife was running around on him. Her boyfriend killed the singer and put

his body into a backyard water tank...and it wasn't discovered for a couple of years.

Recognition

St. Louis finds itself in the national news about once a year.

When I was young, we bragged that St. Louis would be one of the first cities hit by a nuclear attack. This is because the town makes a lot of military equipment.

Regarding how the nation views the Gateway City: STL has a changing "notorious city identifier." Three examples:

1. In the mid '70s, cows were mysteriously killed near St. Louis, and the buzz identified us with that: "The city with UFO cow slaughterings."

2. In the early '80s, toxic waste was poured on the streets of a near-STL town called Times Beach, and it was a national news story. When brother Al told a New Yorker he was from St. Louis, the fellow asked, "St. Louis – is that near Times Beach?"

3. For a while, St. Louis was "near New Madrid," (a small town about three hours away) because a soothsayer predicted an earthquake there on a particular day. Dozens of reporters went to the town and, well.

Retail

Many businesses have Gateway in the name.

In an east-side-of-St. Louis town, they have a lot of "gentlemen's clubs" – though I've never seen a gentleman there.

St. Louis feels the effects of one company's decision very acutely. For example, when the big phone company allowed business casual dress, that hurt lots of men's stores.

Regarding the fast-food chain with the clown at their drive-thru window: It's alive and well in St. Louis, and that amazes Chicagoans.

Friend Marco Torez: Man, they had the best tacos. Can you bring me back two?

St. Louis is a test market for a lot of companies. For example, that clown chain switched their name and menu for a while. Later they switched back.

People

What keeps St. Louis alive and well? More than anything else, it's the deep roots put down by the families there. Generation after generation, most brothers and sisters don't move away – they stick around. Why, St. Louis is like another member of the family. A St. Louisan will say, "Well, this town does that sort of thing," and it sounds like, "Well, my brother does that sort of thing."

To underscore this, when I tell a Chicagoan I'm from St. Louis, I often hear, "Oh, I went there for a wedding once." That's logical, because the city is so family-centric.

St. Louisans...

- ~ tend to discuss "who controls St. Louis."
- ~ could have a southern drawl.
- ~ tend to believe their city often gets the short end of the stick.
- ~ have the western look about 15% of the time.

8.11 Grimbo Brackitt profile

This is the story of Grimbo, our cat.

1986

A black, standard American shorthair kitten was born in May, 1986 in Champaign, IL. His birth home was a cardboard box in an old house Karen lived in as a graduate student. The kitten's mother was a fuzzy blackie, and his father was a handsome gray tomcat. Karen called this baby cat Grimbo.

Karen: I named him that because it was Dickens-ish. London was grimy, he was a black cat, and the Grimbo came out of that.

As a kitten, Grimbo lived with a puppy, and that gave this kitty dog-like qualities. Grimbo was friendly and eager to be loved. That's why normally "un-cat" people became pals with Grimbo.

Marco: I never liked cats, but Grimbo's my friend.

1988...age 2

Karen and Grimbo lived in an apartment about 1/4 mile west of Wrigley Field. Karen went to work, and Grimbo roamed outside all day long. He explored in a close-by radius and made friends with people and cats. In the evening, Karen walked to her front door, jangled her keys, and Grimbo popped out from somewhere.

Karen: He loved the outside life because it was social.

During this time, Grimbo had Collinsville (near St. Louis) address tags – it's long story why. Anyway, Chicagoans saw Grimbo outside, checked his tags, and were thunderstruck. Did this cat walk 300 miles?

Grimbo attacked...

~ loaves of bread.

~ toilet paper rolls.

1991...age 5

I was accepted into Grimbo and Karen's family, and Grimbo made a big sacrifice by leaving his outside neighborhood and becoming an indoor high-rise kitty – no more catting around.

We had two distinct areas in the apartment – one side home and the other side business – and a door in between them. We cut a little cat-hole into the door, so only Grimbo had easy access everywhere. Grimbo raced from room to room with a lot of determination – like he was going after something or getting away from it.

Grimbo melded right into the office. He laid on papers, and slowly walked from desk to desk. I'd be working, then I'd realize Grimbo had been sitting on my lap for some time. He also had a habit of chewing on phone cords. This made our connections so bad, we had to stop receiving calls.

1992...age 6

Ryan: When I was a baby, Grim and I didn't get along well, because I'd pull on his tail and he didn't like it. But he'd let me pet him. And he was always puking.

Grimbo had about eight favorite places in our home, and I'd usually find him setting or sleeping in one of those. He'd spend 15-30 minutes in each spot.
Ryan: Setting and sleeping – that's about it.

Whenever my Dad visited, the cat would crawl onto his lap and conk out.
Dad: Aw, Grimbo, you lazy pig!

1994...age 8

Grimbo was out of shape after two years in the apartment, but in 1994, we bought a house in north Chicago...and he went outside again! Grimbo immediately got his old groove. He established a radius for himself, and he palled around with neighborhood cats in the alley – just like in the 1940s cartoons.

Jimmy: I remember how Grimbo liked to play with the doorbell, and we'd let him in.

Me: Jimmy, he couldn't reach the doorbell.

Jimmy: Oh.

It was real cold, and Grimbo sat inside by the door.

Grimbo: Why won't you people let me out?

Me: Fine – let me show you how cold it is.

I opened the door, Grimbo stepped outside, didn't like the cold, and came right back in. A minute later, he was sitting there again – wanting to be let out.

Late 1990s

The infant Andy didn't play much with Grimbo, but Andy did look at the furry moving shape a lot. Clearly, Grimbo had gotten used to having little ones around the house.

Grimbo: Another baby, hunh? Here we go again.

But time was starting to catch up with our cat. When the calendar added a new year, Grimbo lost a little of his spryness. He ran around the neighborhood less, and he found more happiness on our front yard – in the shade of the big maple tree. Grimbo sat sphinx-like near the sidewalk – because that put him closest to the folks walking by. Busy, keep-to-themselves city people would look at Grimbo and say, "Hi, cat." Grimbo liked this.

August 10th, 1999

Grimbo had developed a growth in his mouth, and the veterinarian diagnosed it as cancerous. This meant it was time for our cat to leave us. Karen was with Grimbo when he was a tiny kitten in Champaign, and she was with him as he slipped away.

A few months later, I was in the yard with the kids. One of those busy, keep-to-themselves city people stopped to talk with me. He hadn't seen the black cat he knew here, and he asked what happened.

9. September

9.1 Timeline

My credit card was missing. If a thief had it, I needed to call the credit card company and cancel my card. But if it was just mislaid in the house, I didn't want to go through the rigmarole of getting a new card. I called the 24-hour help line.

Me to credit card assistant: Could you tell me when was the last activity on my card?

Assistant: 8/24, for \$19.26.

I thought: OK, nobody has gone on a spending spree with it.

Assistant: Is your card missing? I can cancel it.

Me: Oh, hmm. I'll call you back on that. Thanks very much.

It was raining, and I looked out the window. Jimmy had turned the sprinkler on.

9.2 Andy at 14 months

We'll be in the family room, and one of us will get up for something. Andy jumps into the open seat and laughs. Karen calls him Mr. Snagaplace.

Andy was working on a project at Ryan's kid-sized table.

Karen: Andy, please come here.

Andy did, and he dragged the table with him.

Andy: Hi! Hi!

He could work as a sushi chef.

9.3 Circle update

I got together with friend Kyle Edwards. In the three years I've known him, he's owned three different homes. In an eight-month time frame, he 1) shopped for a Loop condominium, 2) sold his other condo, 3) bought the Loop place, 4) shopped for a new condo in north Chicago, 5) sold the Loop place and 6) bought the northern home. And he did something similar with cars.

We have an independent photocopying/office services store close by, and they help me a lot. Let me give you quick introductions to three nice ladies there.

Michelle Jennings has in-laws who spend almost every day of the summer at the big amusement park in the northern suburbs. They walk around and look at how much the flowers are growing, and so forth.

Julie Clarke has a remarkable telephone voice. In the same way some are gifted with singing, others are great at speaking on the phone.

Melanie Bricker is always trying to keep track of her daughters. One is away in college, and the other is a high schooler with lots of extracurricular activities.

Remember that dog show I taped for you? I loaned it to neighbor Windy. She's a dog behaviorist – treats troubled canines. Often, we'll see Windy taking her patients out for walks. Windy also trains show dog owners, but I've never seen her walk them.

9.4 Karen's birthday

For Karen's birthday, we took her out for dinner.
Ryan in the car: Are we just driving around?

Jimmy: Ryan, make your armpit sounds for Dad.

We had a nice dinner at a nice restaurant. We ate there primarily because Karen liked the name of the place.

Regarding Karen's big birthday gift: A week ago, she bought herself a foot massager, so that's what I got her.

The next morning, I was standing in line at the discount store, and I realized we needed to get something for Karen that she didn't buy herself. So, I bought a woman's magazine for her, and she thanked me. Jimmy was in charge of pulling out all the perfume ads.

9.5 Karen stories

Jimmy

Jimmy: If Mom was a seal, would we have to talk like seals?

Me: Sure. You'd have to go like this: "Arf, arf!"

Jimmy: I could do that.

Jack

Karen and I were both chewing our bites of pizza. The phone rang. We looked at each other. We could tell Karen was closer to swallowing her food, so she went for the phone.

I put on lip balm.

Karen: Are you wearing perfume?

Karen is a visionary. She sees a sitting husband and visualizes him out cleaning the yard instead. She sees a sleeping husband and pictures him feeding the baby instead.

Karen stayed with me during my botched sex-change operation.

Me: If I had a tail, I don't think it would be an impressive one. It would be pretty run of the mill.

Karen: I'd take good care of my tail.

Family

Karen was on the phone straightening out a problem with a service company.

Karen: I want you to call me back as soon as you know something, but I need to give you my cellular number, because I need to get provisions for my children.

I thought: Provisions? It sounded like she was going to kill a bear.

Karen bought this children's recliner from a yard sale: \$10. We placed it in the living room and...ugh, the smell! Wowzie, did this chair reek. Karen put the chair into a bedroom and applied some de-stink spray on it. But this act created a foul liquid that leaked out and stunk up a rug under the recliner. Karen asked me to carry the chair and rug to the upstairs bathroom. The chair putrefied the upstairs bathroom and me. So, I put chair and rug on the side of our house, and somebody took them.

9.6 Trip to Veith Island, MI

We headed to Veith Island, MI over Labor Day weekend, because Grandma Martha and Grandpa Fritz have a nice summer home there.

There's a tour of Veith Island in the next section.

So it's stated for emphasis: My in-laws live on an island half the year! We're fortunate they've chosen this unique life. Reasons:

~ The boys love all the things to do on the island. They swim in the lake, ride bikes, explore in the woods (there's an old car there), pump water by the lake – it's a kids' paradise.

~ Martha and Fritz Markley are active folks, and they take us Brackitts many places we'd miss entirely. We climb to the top of the lookout, eat at outdoor food festivals, march in parades – and that's just for starters.

~ We have a great time without wearing out the credit card on motels, rentals and restaurants. It's time for me to admit I'm a little frugal.

Traveling there

Karen drove us in the minivan.

I sat in the passenger seat and vegetated.

Andy sat directly behind his mother and threw things.

Jimmy sat behind me, next to Andy. Jimmy put his feet into Andy's face and Andy bit them.

Ryan sat in the farthest backseat and made remarks.

I took over the driving for awhile.

Me to Karen: Can you tell me where to go?

Ryan: The highway.

We have a frightening-story cassette tape we play many times on our trips. It's all about these kids who turn out to be robots, and it keeps our real kids quiet. On this re-play of the story, Ryan had the following look on his face: This is...kinda OK, but it's kinda stupid, and besides, it's definitely not scary.

Jimmy, after 20 minutes: Dad, this is boring.

Jimmy, after 40 minutes: I'm scared, I'm scared! ...

I have these airplane ground crew headphones that block out noise, and Jimmy put those on.

Jimmy: Now I can't hear the tape.

Karen: Then take the headphones off.

Jimmy: I'm too scared to hear it.

We ate at the fast food place with famous root beer served in mugs, and it was like when we had it 25 years ago.

Me: Ryan, what do you want?

Ryan: Just three large orders of fries.

We drove through a picturesque town named Cousen Corner.

Jimmy: That's why I see all those cousins.

Jimmy: When are we leaving?

Me: Monday morning.

Jimmy: We won't get home until a million o'clock.

Ferry

We made it to the ferry that takes us seven miles into Lake Michigan and onto Veith Island.

On the boat-for-vehicles, there are four columns of cars and five rows of them. About half the boat has an upper deck, so we can sit up there and get a big dose of view, mist and wind. I'd guess we were going around 25 mph, but don't ask me about knots.

Sometimes, Fritz gets called for emergency locksmith work on these boats, because people lock their keys in their cars.

Ferryboat drivers always look cool and collected.

I looked up into the wheel house (that's what it's called, right?). They have a large wooden steering wheel with those knobular handles coming off it – just like with old ships. To my surprise, there was Jimmy sitting inside with the pilot and crew. (Jimmy said later, "I just asked them if I could.")

Ryan joined them up there, and I had a long conversation with the life preservers.

Did you know on a boat the water might spray that water into your face? The thing about boats is they bounce around on the water. It's not like being on land.

Our ferry pulled into the Veith Island dock area. It made a loud "sudden slowing of the engine" sound.

Ryan, dramatically: What the – ?

When we left the ferry, Karen drove, and Jimmy, Ryan and I walked on ahead.

Jimmy: That's less weight in the car, and that's good.

We then all piled in and rode to Grandma and Grandpa's house.

Ryan: But, what if they moved?

We got in and greeted Grandma and Grandpa!

Clams

The beach is a splendid example of how un-crowded this island can be. During a popular time, there were only about seven people out beaching. Ryan, Jimmy and I looked for clamshells. There we were, a dad and two sons running along the beach – we looked like a 1974 life insurance commercial.

There were only a few shells, and Ryan got most of them. So, Jimmy made a desperate grab from Ryan's clam box.

Jimmy, with a few shells: Wah hoo I'm rich!

Ryan: Hey!

I made Jimmy give them back, and he wailed.

Finally, we found plenty of shells. The mother load! The kids loaded up.

Me: At your school's Show and Tell, you can give each kid a clam.

Ryan: No way! I'll take a picture and show it to 'em. These clams – I'm selling them.

Me: Who's gonna give you money for 'em?

Ryan: A trader.

Me: Do you see clam-trading places around?

Ryan: Just don't worry about it. Do you know any junk men who'll buy them?

Me: We can look one up in the yellow pages.

Ryan: Pugh! "Look one up."

Finally, we were overflowing with clams.

Me: OK, Ryan, let's go.

Ryan: Just a second.

Me: Come on, we've got to go.

Ryan: Just five more minutes.

Me: No, come on.

Ryan: OK, hold on.

Me: Let's go!

Ryan: Just one more round.

Dinosaur search

In the evening, Jimmy and I went out looking for dinosaurs.

Me: Why do you think there are dinosaurs on the island?

Jimmy: 'Cause when I was three, I saw one. It was really scary. It had one of those things on the back of his head. I think they hang out by the river.

We got our flashlights and walked toward the road.

Jimmy: Dad, I'm scared. Let's drive and look for 'em.

We got in the minivan, and Jimmy made up a song:

The creepy, creepy flashlight

And with the hand

The song is in the dark

The hand is sooo so creepy
It scares little Jimmy
Now the creepy, creepy hand song is done

I switched on the air conditioner.
Jimmy: Don't turn that on – it sounds like dinosaur's breath.

We returned.
Grandma: Did you see any dinosaurs?
Me: Not this time.
Jimmy: I did.

Miscellaneous

Karen: You're going to jog?
Me: Yes.
Karen: It's deer season, so don't go in the forest or you might get shot.
Me: I'll stay on the road, no problem.
Karen: Don't wear fur or anything.

There's a gift shop with a steep roof, and grass grows on it. How does the grass get cut? Grandpa: Two goats stand on the roof and eat it.
Jimmy: I'd like to go up there with them.
Ryan: Jim, you would regret that.

Grandma manages the island household, so she keeps a focus on...
~ how everything should be recycled.
~ the best mosquito repellants.
~ procedures for bringing in distant TV stations.

Grandpa...
~ has the kids help in the garden.
~ takes kids to the island dump (not permanently).
~ gets kids to help fill bike tires.

Jimmy: They've got a lot of wild cows on this island.

Island phenomenon: I can look up at night and see...stars! Lots of them.
Living in the city so long, I forgot they were up there. Now I can see why astronomy was so big in 3000 BC. They looked into the sky, because didn't have TV.

Interviews

I talked with Jimmy about the trip.
Me: What did you do on Veith Island?
Jimmy: I don't know.
Me: You went swimming?

Jimmy: Yeah.

Me: And what was good about that?

Jimmy: Those clams. They were all over.

Me: What did you like about going shopping with my mom?

Jimmy: I saw piglets there.

Me: At that farm. Did you pet 'em?

Jimmy: No, they're too scary. And stinky.

Me: What else did you see at the farm?

Jimmy: Ostriches.

Me: I don't like ostriches. They scare me.

Jimmy: One bit you.

Me: Almost. But I don't like 'em, because they're real weird.

Jimmy: Heh hah hah aaaaaaaah!

Me: Did you pet the ostriches?

Jimmy: No way, 'cause they eat people.

Then I talked with Ryan.

Me: So you collected about a thousand clams.

Ryan: Yeah.

Me: And you went swimming.

Ryan: Yeah.

Me: You went pretty far out?

Ryan: Yeah.

Me: You enjoyed riding your bike?

Ryan: Yeah.

Me: Your bike – you fell over at one point.

Ryan: Yeah.

Me: You hurt your knee.

Ryan: Yeah.

Me: Can you talk about these things?

Ryan: No.

Here's my interview with the baby.

Andy: Awhaaaahaaa. Dah. (Cough.) Eah. Chshiiiih. Em mem.

The trip didn't sink in too much with Andy. He bustled around the house, picked up items and shook them – the noisier the better. When the toddler found a cowbell, he was one big smile.

Andy's expression: This thing is too wild! [Clang, clang, clang.] Can you people hear this?

Departure

Of course, we thanked our gracious hosts for everything!

We went to the ferry dock for our return trip, and there was a one-hour wait. Karen stayed with the baby in line in the minivan. The two older kids and I walked near the ferry to get ice cream.

Me to Ryan: You're a big person now, so you should be able to take a root beer float to your Nan.

Ryan: You're a bigger person, so you really should.

After a little more discussion, Ryan delivered the float and returned.

Ryan: Man, our minivan's on the other side of the island.

Me: What do you want ice cream-wise?

Ryan: I want strawberry ice cream with chocolate topping on top – and sprinkles.

Me: Are you pregnant?

Ryan: Yeah, right.

Jimmy: I'm a Democrat.

The ferry was carrying a big huge truck full of worn mattresses. When we docked, that truck rushed off big-time. What could the emergency be with used mattresses?

On the way home, we stopped at this crowded and popular petting zoo. Of course we wanted to feed the critters, so I bought little containers of milk and feed. But the animals were all full! They were laying around, sacked out – could've been watching a football game.

Young pig to me: Oh, no thank you. I couldn't eat another bite.

9.7 Veith Island tour

Dimensions

Veith Island is on the west side of Michigan, on Lake Michigan. To get the picture of this, look at the palm of your left hand. The “hand/four fingers” part is the state of Michigan, and your thumb is a peninsula that runs up the left side of the state.

Drive to the top of your thumb, and then the analogy breaks down. There’s an island nine miles from the end of your thumbnail – a vacation destination called Veith Island. You take the ferry across a stretch of water, and then you’re on the island.

Veith Island is seven miles E-W, and eight miles N-S, and about 60 total square miles. In one day, you could set foot on each square mile. The island is shaped like a square cookie that, when baked, expanded and became its own unique form...but remained essentially square.

Maybe the nicest thing about Veith Island: It’s not congested. This is because an island isn’t easy to reach. Other tourist spots are also a good value, but they pack the visitors in like canned fish. Sardines would enjoy Veith Island.

Some of the people who live here are rich. They’ll land their plane on the grass runway, and then they’ll jump into their “island car.” It’s a regular auto, but it lives at the airport until it gets used. If some punk steals a car, hey good luck keeping it. The ferry drivers are waiting.

Roads

Most of the roads are in a grid – they’re straight and orderly.

As I walk down the road, I can hear 1) crickets, and 2) the sound of a single car that won’t pass me for another 20 seconds. It’s the kind of quiet that visitors like, but it turns prisoners crazy. We’ve seen that in the movies.

Everyone on the road waves to each other, and that’s foreign to Chicagoans. We don’t even like looking at each other. Note: The “cool wave” is to have your left hand near the top of the steering wheel, and to lift your index finger.

Big trees form walls on both sides of the road throughout much of the island.

Cows stand around and graze from this six-foot roll of hay – enough for all those stomachs.

Homes

There's a mobile home (or whatever they're called now) with a freestanding garage. The garage looks more permanent than the home. I'd gladly live in a mobile home, but it'd be too easy for my family to leave me.

I had limpa bread on the island and enjoyed it. Martha searched all over to learn where they bake this bread, and...it's made by a bakery that's 1/2 a mile from our Chicago home. True! And to this day, I've never been there.

Many of the homes are...

- ~ traditional, two-story Victorians.
- ~ multi-room log cabins.
- ~ ones where the original structure was put up in the '70s, and they built four add-ons in a sprawling, "we've got land so why not" way.
- ~ farmhouses. One has a big wooden flag nailed to it.

Walking along, it will go from three homes in a row to quite rural again. Then it'll go back to homes again, but not the same ones.

~ There's a porch swing made entirely out of wood. Picture this: Two big A's facing each other, with a L__L swing in between. Picture me sleeping on it, and the owners calling the police.

~ There are a lot of huge mailboxes. The further I go into the country, the larger the mailboxes get.

~ There's a washtub with flowers in it.

Outside Martha & Fritz's house

F&M's place is on 15 acres that's a quarter mile from the beach. A winding gravel drive takes us back to their regular house (not a cabin).

Looking at their home from the outside: It's white. The bedrooms are on the left, and the main entry is in the middle. There used to be a carport on the right, and it was converted into a large room because they have scores of grandchildren.

To the right of their house, Fritz built a two-car stand-alone garage. However, I've never seen a car in this garage, because Fritz uses it as his work/storage area. Now, Fritz is running out of room again, because every Mr. Fix-it needs more space. So, he's constructing a shed between the house and garage, and I was kind enough to watch him build it.

They keep a deer lick – a big stick of salt – in their backyard. It's popular in the antlered community, proving that deer should watch their sodium intake.

Inside the house

The front door leads into their living room. This area has three recliners, and the walls are full of family pictures. We have a lot of similar photos, but ours are still in the envelopes.

On the left: There are two bedrooms and a bathroom. Don't flush certain items, because the septic tank doesn't like them.

Straight ahead: A kitchen.

On the right: That formerly-a-carport now-a-mega-bedroom.

Their TV reception picks up two channels with ease. Otherwise, it's a lot of work to bring stations in – you need an electrical engineer in the family. Also, because we're in a rural area, most of the commercials are public service announcements. They say things like, "Don't take the car – you'll kill yourself!!!!!!!"

I was there in the afternoon, and this terrible syndicated talk show was on. I changed the channel, and the other station had on the same talk show – same episode. I watched the one that was a few seconds ahead of the other.

History

Back in the 1800s, folks from cold European climates found they could apply their cold water fishing skills in a far away land (an island, in fact) that had a lot of fish and hungry customers. Good thing I wasn't with them, because I'd be like, "Guys, we can catch fish in the warm places too! Let's throw our lines in Boca Raton." In those days, they hung people like me.

Establishments

~ A food stand has a jukebox with a lot of '80s songs on it. Karen enjoyed hearing them, but Ryan acted like we were torturing him.

There's a Veterans Hall. They have a cannon (howitzer?) out front. On the July Fourth weekend there's a fish boil festival – but the fish aren't celebrating. People stand around this bubbling cauldron, toss the fish in, and look like they're practicing black magic.

There's a baseball field where the July Fourth celebrations take place. Some years ago, Ryan and Jimmy's decorated wagon came in third place, and that was cause for much joy. I was jealous and flew into a tantrum.

9.8 Correspondence with Scott Rush

Friend Scott Rush edits a newspaper in Maui. Every fall, he goes home to St. Louis for a month. Scott then takes a weekend side-trip to Chicago, and he and I travel somewhere in a 150-mile radius. We plan our annual trip via e-mail exchanges, and here are some of those discussions.

Coming to Chicago

Jack: Could you come up around the 17th-18th etc., because Karen's Sept. 15 tax deadlines will have passed, and she can take care of the boys, and we can drive pretty far away. So, unless you want to be a jerk about it, that's the best time.

Scott: I'll do what's best for your wife if I also know it's going to make your life difficult.

Jack: You're incoherent. You've been drinking. My wife is happy about Sept. 17-18, and she wants us to get to the bottom of this. I'll need an answer or I won't have household harmony.

Scott: I want you to put your lovely wife's mind at ease. Goodness knows she deserves a break. I don't know how she has managed to struggle through the '90s with you, I honestly don't.

Jack: Then we're set on 17-18. I'm cc'ing Karen on this, so try to keep your language clean for once.

Scott: There's nothing I could write in an e-mail that might compare to the horror of seeing you every morning.

Jack: I'd expect that response from a subhuman like you.

Scott: The only time I feel subhuman is when I lower myself to communicate with you, or try to.

Jack: Thanks, Freckle. Probably the best weekend trip would be in northwestern Illinois, since we want to see where Lincoln fought in the Blackhawk War. I'm casually introducing the idea of calling you Freckle, because then it'll become your nickname. Odd that "Freckle" hasn't been used as the title of a children's book.

Scott: I'd never let a child read something you've written.

Jack: All the Blackhawk War stuff is in the Quad Cities. Do you think Lincoln knew those four towns by that name?

Scott: Don't tie Abe to your stupid questions.

Jack: Abe? Actually, all these years, I thought you were referring to Evelyn Lincoln, JFK's secretary.

Scott: I most certainly wasn't or wouldn't.

Jack: You were.

Scott: You seem to be calling me a liar.

Jack: I don't SEEM to be doing anything.

[Moving on to other discussions...]

Whales

Scott: There's a foundation in Maui that makes a mint on whale-watch cruises. When the whales are in Alaska, they cash in by charging people enormous sums to attend seminars by worthless, overpaid luminaries.

Jack: Excellent. These con artists get the known name in there, and they give the tourist cattle something to moo about at home.

Scott: I hope it didn't sound like that's what I meant.

Jack: I apologize for attempting to make you sound intelligent.

Scott: You make everyone sound intelligent.

Distressed hair

Scott: It seems women have somehow decided that curlers and other put-up-hair devices are desirable to wear in public. Where did that awful fashion come from? The girl who cut my hair last time – and she had the potential to look painfully good – had this chopped, bobby-pinned abomination on her head. Where do they get these goofy gimmicks, and when will they finally run out of them?

Jack: It's called Distressed Hair, and it's a big deal now. Be glad that your look is finally in style.

Writing

Jack: Which is worse: Your smell or your writing?

Scott: Look, my writing is fine. I think it's time I admitted I make a conscious effort to dumb down whatever I write to you. I don't want you to feel any worse about yourself than necessary, although I think it necessarily ought to be really bad.

Jack: Let me tell you something – I don't like you. You always think you have it over on people, and you don't.

Scott: It isn't for lack of trying to communicate on your level. It's practically method acting, attempting to put myself into the head of a loser. But I can't reach you. And you can't seem to appreciate that I do try.

Jack: Keep sending these offensive remarks, because I'm continuing to build my court case against you.

Scott: Can you tell me specifically what you find offensive? I want to say it more.

Poetry

Jack: I wrote a poem about you:

Oh Scott is
A sack of garbage
Some restless carnage
The one impediment

Oh Scott has
No human features
He's more a creature
Put him in a side show tent

Scott: There are no rhymes anywhere, but it's just close enough to rhyming that you can't pass it off as bad free verse. This says much worse about you than it does about me.

Reading

Jack: I was reading this instruction book, and the dunce who wrote it kept starting his sentences with, "Well, ..." I thought, "This guy is a total idiot."

Scott: And still, there you were reading it. Tell me, who was the bigger dunce? Who was the more profound idiot? Well?

Credit card

Scott: I got junk mail from a credit card company that wants to send me a card emblazoned with a "science fiction" theme – UFOs, Stonehenge, aliens, etc. It says, "Five distinctive card designs that reflect your devotion to science fiction." And it addresses me personally, Scott Rush. That's me, a devoted science fiction fan. What I want to know is what mailing list I could have gotten on that would make some company sense I could be that much of a loser.

Jack: Who cares.

Scott: I can't tell you how embarrassed I am for you, though not surprised, that you said this. There are so many federal agencies I could sic on you that I don't know which one I'd call first.

Jack: [sic]

Scott: The [sic] comment is normally used when a word has been misspelled or otherwise used incorrectly. I think it's impressive, in a way, that you've hit such a depth – you're only in your mid 30s.

Jack: I am in my mid 30s, so speak to me with respect. I'm not some sort of cockroach you can step on.

Scott: You are some sort of cockroach – and not one of the pleasant species, either.

Jack: If I were a cockroach, I'd be of a pleasant species.

9.9 Trips to Indianapolis and Galena

Scott Rush came into town, and we carried out our plans to take a coupla trips.

Saturday: Indianapolis

Scott and I traveled to an antiques auction in Indianapolis. Scott is an antique tools fanatic, so it all adds up.

4:00 am

I woke Scott, then I went back to sleep. At 4:30, he woke me, and we started driving. One of the best experiences is zooming down a traffic-free highway in the early morning hours. Dracula knows what I'm talking about.

Scott talked endlessly about 1800s tools, and I didn't want to tell him it was stupefyingly dull, because that's insulting.

Honoring the Chicago Skyway

We drove on the Skyway – so named because it's an eight-mile long bridgish road (meaning that it's up high) between Chicago and Gary, IN. It goes over an industrial part of northern Indiana, so below us we saw big factories, a giant electrical station, radioactive lakes, and so on.

It's a unique tour ride – the perfect opposite of seeing trees and mountains.

7:45 am

We got into a northern Indianapolis suburb, because that's where the auction was. It would be awhile before this place opened, so I slept in the back seat while Scott kibitzed with other buyers.

The auction house was a giant white garage. Inside, it was a big room shaped like a shoebox, but it was larger than that. It had cement floors, white plasterboard walls, etc.

8:15 am

Bidders did the casual “quick wave of the hand to signify I'll pay that amount” like in the auctions on TV melodramas, but sometimes that didn't work. Two bidders sitting near each other would think he/she was the one securing the item, and that led to a melee. To break the impasse, the auctioneer would set up a tiny auction between the two. Moral: Don't be a cool bidder like on TV.

As the auctioneer did the pitter-patter, his very nervous assistant held up the tools and pointed his finger at whomever was bidding. If nobody wanted the item, this man would bug his eyes at us in a threatening way.

A typical woodworking tool from the 1800s went for about \$75 in the auction, and Scott said that was a good deal, because it would cost more elsewhere.

Scott was outbid on everything.

1:10 pm

We drove back and crabbed at each other due to a lack of sleep. Scott directed a number of comments at me, and we both knew they were uncalled for.

7:10 pm

We got back home.

Scott and I were watching this basketball film – one of those coach stories. I got preoccupied and missed the last part.

Me: What happened at the end?

Scott: This basketball hit the coach in the nose and he died on the court.

Me: Really?

Scott: No, come on.

Me: That would've been a good ending.

When we were at our house, Scott and I exchanged insulting e-mails with each other, but we never discussed them.

Sunday: Galena, IL

Scott is a Ulysses S. Grant fanatic, and since Grant spent a significant part of his adult life in Galena, IL, we headed 100 miles west to that historic town.

7:30 am

We started driving west and were making good progress, but then I saw a sign: "Welcome to Wisconsin." Uh oh. Going west from Chicago shouldn't have put us north in Wisconsin. But somehow, the E-W tollway turned north, and there we were in Beloit, WI.

We went to Ready's fast food restaurant to get a new route to Galena. Of course, I didn't ask any teens who worked behind the counter, because they never know streets. So, I approached a customer who was getting straws and napkins, and I figured he had to be from Beloit, because his nose was shaped the same as his daughter's.

Me: Could you tell me the best way to Galena?

Man: Sorry – we're not really from around here.

There went my nose theory.

We eventually got a convoluted set of directions, and we drove on Highway 11 west, across the near-bottom of Wisconsin.

Eleven is a picturesque, two-lane rolling road. While the interstate has made driving as dull as possible, on these old roads I get to wonder what's around the next turn. I'd see a small farm in the valley, and that family was very far from a quick shop.

We stopped at a fine Wisconsin cheese store. Unfortunately, I had some involuntary gas in there, and this bothered Scott.
Me to Scott, afterwards: It's weird how that store had a restroom.
Scott, perturbed: You used that store as a restroom.

We went into this quiet little town. They have a nice antique store – I know you'd like it a lot. What's obvious is true: These antique dealers from the small towns get unusual items from local estate auctions, etc., but they don't get the high customer traffic. So, their pieces have a lot of uniqueness and the prices are good.

For example, I saw this 1920s-esque blonde wood recliner for \$375. An antique recliner... A man must have sat in this chair 30 years and waited for TV football to arrive.

During the trip, Scott asserted that the best part about eating a bag of barbecue potato chips is smelling them just when the bag is opened. No way! Everyone knows the best part is eating the concentrated crunchies at the bottom of the bag.

11:00 am

We made it to Grant's home.

Background: Grant tanned horse leather in Galena before the Civil War; then he became a surprisingly successful war leader; then he lived in Galena again for a little while – in the house we looked at – and he was elected president. If anyone was waiting for Grant to finish tanning their horse leather, too bad!

Notable things about Grant's digs:

- ~ Unlike a lot of these historic homes, most of the furniture is original. It's also small, because people were shorter in those days.
- ~ One of the chairs has a horsehair covering.
- ~ The Grants had this grand piano in their front room – a rectangular-box-shaped grand piano. It was made that way for easy shipping. Apparently, this piano never worked right for anybody, but Grant didn't care. He never liked music.

Me to Scott: Let's say I went back in time to when Grant was a tanner here. I'd be extremely fearful that anything I did could change the course of history. I mean, if I bought something in a store, that would change the totals in hundreds of Illinois banks. Scott: C'mon. You could kidnap Grant for a week and not change anything.

Me: You're crazy! That's dangerous thinking.

12:10 pm

Background on Galena:

A lot of Illinois is flat, because thousands of years ago the glacier overran it. However, la Glace decided to not cover a mountainous area that would be Galena.

Galena is set on a river that used to be called the Fever River. However, they changed it to the Galena River – because “Fever”...ew. A steep hill rises up from the river, and Galena is all over that.

Luckily, no idiots tore down all the great mid-1800s buildings, so in the 1960s, everyone could wake up to the idea that Galena was a fantastic tourist attraction. Now, Galena has an impressive main street, because they've retained/restored the area's 19th century look. There are no embarrassing 1960s structures.

Scott and I walked about and rooted around the stores. One specializes in teddy bears, another in quilts, and another in bird-related items.

If anyone wanted to create an 1800s holiday look, Galena is the place to get it.

We also went by a refurbished hotel where Lincoln stood on the balcony and gave a speech. I wanted to give one too, but it was time to go.

3:00

We drove back in the rain, and oh my – we almost got into an accident. We were in the right lane of a four-lane highway, and this convertible passed us on the left. It swerved in front of us and spun around 360 degrees clockwise. I moved into the left lane and avoided them. The convertible banged into the guardrail on the right – luckily not too hard.

Me, shaking afterwards: I learned that maneuver from that driving video game I always played.

Scott: Don't tell me I owe my life to you and a 1981 video game.

9.10 Telephone

Ryan

I was on the telephone, and Ryan was walking by.

Me: Ryan, I've gotta go upstairs, so could you hang up this phone?

Ryan: OK.

I handed him the phone, and he immediately hung it up.

We got this recorded phone call – an automated voice – saying that my books were overdue at the library. I thought Ryan would like to hear it.

Me: Here, Ryan.

Ryan, looking stricken: Dad, you're in a lot of trouble.

Jimmy

Me: When I was a little boy, we didn't have a phone in the car.

Jimmy: Man. How could you call anybody?

Me: You didn't call anybody. You just couldn't.

Jimmy: What about house trailers on the highway?

Me: They didn't have phones either.

Jimmy: You didn't have electricity in your house?

Me: We did have that. But when Grandma was a girl, she didn't have a phone in her house.

Jimmy: Whoah. They didn't have electricity?

Me: They did have electricity, but they didn't have TV.

Jimmy: How could she watch things?

Me: They read a lot of books and they listened to the radio.

Jimmy: They didn't even get to watch the news?

Me: No, they didn't.

Jimmy: Why didn't they build TV stations?

Me: That's a good question. TV was around, but they had a war on and they had to worry about winning that.

Jimmy: Who invented TV?

Me: Filo Farnsworth was one of the main people who did it.

Jimmy: Is he still alive?

Me: No, he died.

Jimmy: The Three Musketeers helped him invent TV.

Me: Why?

Jimmy: Because they died too.

Me: Hm.

Jimmy: Did Grandma watch the Three Musketeers when she was a little girl?

Me: Maybe in the movies, but they didn't have TV.

Jimmy: When I was a little boy we didn't have anything.

Karen

Telemarketer: Is Karen Brackitt available?

Me: No, I'm sorry.

Telemarketer: Because Karen Brackitt has been pre-selected for a beautiful vacation trip to Aruba.

Me: I'm sorry, but I'm afraid Karen Brackitt wouldn't be interested.

Telemarketer: That's fine – we have plenty of people who'd love this vacation. Goodbye.

Karen was phoning friends Brian Love and Rebecca Johnson.

Karen to me: Could you try calling this number – it's wrong. Someone named Edith Forsenna is on the answering machine.

I called and heard: "This is 847..."

I concluded that Karen thought "eight four seven" sounded like "Edith Forsenna."

Jack

On-hold recording: Do not hang up the phone. That will only further delay your call.

Cellular phone telemarketer: And we offer our [something something] plan for \$30 a month.

Me: OK.

Telemarketer: Or you can have our [something else] plan – that's only a dollar a day.

Family

Our far-too-unnecessarily complex answering machine has all these buttons we'll never use. For example, there's "Memo" – lets Karen record a message to me before she walks out the door. This would flip me out!

I'd think: What? I thought Karen was just in the house, and she must be calling me from somewhere else. This is freaky.

When you call our house now that's not me on the answering machine – it's an electronic voice asking you to please leave a message. I'm tired of re-recording every time the electricity goes out, and that electronic voice doesn't do much else around here anyway.

We have a telephone in the process of breaking, so Karen and I have an unspoken understanding about it. If she's on the phone talking with me and it disconnects, we don't need to call back to explain the problem. It proves that non-communication is one key to marriage.

So much is dependent upon the other in this house. I had to make a business phone call. That's a simple thing, right? But...

Step 1: I had to fix the phone in order to make the connection non-static.

Step 2: I didn't want to look at the toys strewn around so they had to be picked up.

Step 3: Resolve that "phone company disconnected me" deal.

Talk

Who needs that numeric password on their answering machine? If someone wants to hear my messages, go enjoy.

9.11 Chicago profile: Read L about it

Karen: Chicago has good mass transit.

To get you in the mood for our ride on the L (short for “elevated”) train, here are some announcements from the smooth-voiced recorded guy who speaks while we’re riding:

“Welcome aboard the CTA Brown Line Train. Sedgewick is next. Soliciting on CTA trains is prohibited. Violators will be arrested. This is Sedgewick. Doors closing. This is a Brown Line train to Kimball. Diversey is next. Smoking, eating, littering, playing radios or loud devices is prohibited. Standing passengers, for your own safety, please do not stand near the doors.”

Peculiarity of living in the city: As I’m walking under the train platform, I can hear the “Attention passengers” train announcements up above.

Where they go

About seven different lines stretch out from downtown, and they’re identified by color. To see what it’s like, take your right hand, point it left, and stretch out your fingers. Your palm is the Loop.

In the Loop: There are four streets with the L tracks above them, and you can certainly drive under a train. The L streets are...

- ~ challenging for drivers, since you can easily hit a metal support.
- ~ functional. They have lotsa fast food places rather than theaters.
- ~ noisy.
- ~ darker – less sunlight comes in.
- ~ older feeling, because most new high-rises aren’t built there.
- ~ brimming with pedestrian traffic – great for shops.

The train station

There are two liquor stores near our stop, because most passengers like to sip the hard stuff while riding.

If it’s late at night, the cops might patrol a station with their canine crew – German shepherds with bulletproof jackets and little cages over their muzzles. I’ll challenge these dogs for fun.

Waiting for a train is a little like standing on the bank of a calm but dangerous river, and the current is electricity. At one stop, someone actually went into the forbidden track area and spray-painted this message on the third rail: “Over too much more wizard.” Words to live by.

Train platforms are 1) above ground, except in some parts of the Loop, where they're 2) below ground.

1) Above ground

The platforms are a combination of wood and metal – older stops have more wood than metal, newer ones have more metal than wood. Some have a roof on top like a house, but there are no walls to speak of. There's a row of heat lamps in the ceiling (!), but they aren't strong enough to warm up a pizza.

One winter morning, it was bitter cold. There were about 100 people waiting on the train platform, and this gray pigeon was roosting in the middle of us – an unusual sight. I guess the pigeon found it the warmest spot available. Lady commuters stood protectively near the bird. This pigeon had a lot of friends.

2) Below ground

The underground platform is a concrete world. Go down the steps and you'll get hit with a wet cement breeze and smell. They have televisions hanging in the underground platforms, but unfortunately, they show textualish information rather than real TV.

The train's coming!

I can tell this by looking up the tracks and seeing these big bright headlights. It's unwise to lean in for a closer look.

A train is usually four to eight steel-gray cars – the length depends on the time of day and the route. Pick any car to get on, because they're all the same.

Do people hang out between cars while the train is going? I've only seen it once – it's illegal.

The trains run on electricity, so they're quiet by locomotive standards (however, the really long trains are loud – lotsa clacking). The main noise is from the air circulators. They drive out odors in case somebody cuts one.

Interior

There are 45-50 seats in a train car, and they're so close together people sitting side-by-side usually touch – ew. Once those seats get filled, roughly 50 people can stand, and roughly is the operative word.

Most everything in the car is some degree of tan. Even the fluorescent lights turn the place shiny beige. They have fake wood-grain panels in spots, and no one has ever said, "How nice – they put real wood in this train."

On TV commercials, standing commuter train riders hold onto straps hanging from the ceiling. But the L trains don't have those. Instead, vertical metal bars

connect from floor to ceiling (they're used to keep the seats up), and standing passengers clutch onto those.

Since the happy development of spray-paint remover, the trains are pretty much graffiti-free. Graffitiists have resorted to scratching on the Plexiglas windows, but it's just not the same for them.

People

Most passengers sit stoically and silently – like they're having a non-expression contest. Some who didn't get enough attention as children speak loudly, because they wrongly assume others want to hear their half-baked thinking.

A lot of grizzled people ride the trains.

On the L, the “cool Chicago guy” is determined to look like nothing fazes him. He...

- ~ keeps his eyes somewhat droopy – in between normal and “I'm on drugs.”
- ~ slumps in his seat, but not as much as a high school freak.

Riding the crowded train, I see total strangers close up – sometimes five inches away – for long periods. This is the opposite of talking on the phone with someone I've never seen, because on the train I'm seeing people but not hearing their voices. Sometimes a person will say to me, “Get away.”

I was on the train, and this mid-30s red-haired fellow had an envelope ready to mail. It was addressed to “Mom and Dad” in a small Indiana town. He personified a Chicago story: He grew up in a relatively small place, moved to Chicago, and wrote to his parents back home.

The later it gets the more tattoos there are.

One late-night L operator was more like a DJ on a very cool radio station. He spoke in a slow and deep voice.

Operator: We're flying at an altitude of 27 feet, on the train where love flows like a warm evening breeze.

He was a favorite with riders.

I was on one train, and at every stop the operator would announce, “Let the people on please, let 'em on.” Maybe 50 people were on this whole train – not enough to warrant the conductor's statement. I wondered if this fellow had dreams about passengers not letting the people on.

When I'm riding the L, another train might come alongside us and run sorta parallel. I get to see what the other riders are doing, and well, they ain't ballroom dancing. They look just like us.

Windows

At night, I can look at myself in the window reflection, see the actual city outside the window, and imagine I'm a ghost floating along.

Spooky people certainly will stare at me on the train. The more clever ones study other riders by looking at the reflection in the windows – it's like a mirror. Once, I thought this weirdo was gazing at the scenery, but I looked at the guy's reflection and dah! Freakastare right at me.

Cell phones

Some talk into their cell phones like they're in a hog-calling contest. The phonee (double meaning) has to lay it on thick and loud. His body language says, "Hey dere, you other people on the train, lookie at me! I'm talkin' on a phone wit no wires! But I'm actin' cool so's it seems like I don't care." The cell guy is never satisfied that he's being jerky enough – he's always reaching for new lows.

Sightseeing

In the Loop, retailers advertise to elevated train riders – they put displays in their second floor window space. For example, a smart maternity place has their outfits showing, and when mom-to-be goes by on the train, the connection is made.

I need to write more about what's outside the train windows. That can go into the neighborhoods write-up I also promised to put together.

Alternatively, I'll tack this on: The L now extends to both Chicago airports. So, instead of driving out to the airports to drop off and pick up our much-loved visitors, I tell them, "Just take the train."

10. October

10.1 Timeline

Happy birthday to Ma Brackitt! Seems like just yesterday I was holding you, our little baby. Hang on – that's your line.

Some parts of the world become older faster than others. For example, Ryan is quickly becoming 10. But our new city library building is going to be eight years old soon, and I thought it was only about four. My assessment: Large buildings age faster than children.

I went to the airport in Chicago to buy a ticket for Ryan.
Me to counter attendant: My son's flying from St. Louis to Chicago on November 7th.
Attendant: All right, the ticket is \$73.37. Since you're prepaying, it's an extra \$25. That comes to –
Me: Why the \$25?
Attendant: It's an electronic transaction fee. We offer it in case the passenger can't get his ticket in St. Louis. We'd give it to him electronically.
Me: Oh, I won't need that. I'll be in St. Louis with my son, and I'll give him the ticket.
Attendant: OK. Then It's \$98.37.
Me: I thought it was like \$73.00.
Attendant: The \$25 electronic transaction fee adds to the cost.
Me: Hold it – I don't need the \$25 thing.
Attendant: I thought you did.

It's Sweetest's Day! Oh, who cares. I've lost track of all these phony holidays created by the greeting card and gift-oriented companies. They'll drive everyone broke, and then they'll create Bankruptcy Lawyer Appreciation Day.

10.2 Andy at 15 months

I think Andy's first sentence is, "Daza ba-ba." Possible translation: "That's a bottle." He also says, "Mlrr ba-ba," and experts are still interpreting this.

Jimmy: Mom, Andy wants to say something.

Karen: Andy, what do you want to say?

Andy stood there.

When I'm getting Andy his ba-ba, sometimes we'll perform a little one-act play.

Me: Dats da ba-ba?

Andy: Ba-ba ba-ba.

Me: Mama ba-ba? Ba-ba Mama ba-ba?

Andy: Mama.

Me, gesturing with my hands: Mamaaaa.

Andy, waving: Ah lela!

Our play is as far off Broadway as you can get.

10.3 Circle update

The tape player

Yesterday morning, I woke up late, so we rushed around and got out about 8:15 am. I put a bunch of items into a plastic grocery bag and walked with the kids to our car. After dropping Andy off, I looked in the bag for my tape player. It was missing – replaced by a hole in the bag.

Me: Ahh!

Problem was, if I went back to look for the tape player I would have been really late. Then it hit me: Sari Fare! He owns Izmit Dry Cleaners – it's catty corner to us. I called him on the cell phone, and he graciously agreed to walk my path to see if the player was there. Afterward, Sari told me what happened.

Sari: I was with a customer when you called, so I couldn't get out then. When I went, I saw this man walking up ahead of me. He was about 50 years old and didn't look like he was from around here. I saw him bend down, pick up something, and put it in his pocket. So, I yelled to him, "Hey! That's mine!" He said, "Oh, I'm sorry." And he gave me your tape player. In another minute, I wouldn't have found it.

Of course, I thanked Sari many times, and the police are still looking for that guy.

10.4 Ryan's birthday

We had a nice birthday celebration for Ryan. Karen was the party planner, and better her than me. Not that I didn't want to do it.

I told Ryan his Grandpa Fritz, Grandma Martha and Uncle Neil were coming to the party, and the boy's eyes got bigger. Translation: "Ooh, more presents."

Stories from our family birthday party for Ryan...

Grandma Martha: Ryan, do you want orange juice, apple juice or milk?

Ryan: Yes.

Ryan had pizza. First, he ate the sausages, then the cheese, and then he put his head down – right into the food.

Ryan: The pizza must have sleeping pills in it.

Andy ate noodles and threw them.

Jimmy and Ryan talked with each other about the latest fad. Because anything popular has to be sold 25 different ways, their conversation reached into the...

~ cartoon TV series

~ line of toys

~ video game

~ t-shirts and running shoes

We people over 11 just looked happily/mildly bewildered, and I thought about my credit card.

Brother-in-law Neil and I were assigned to change a light socket in the basement. Martha: Be careful. Make sure you aren't standing in water, don't use a metal ladder – oh, maybe I should come down there with you.

Neil: Don't worry – we'll be fine.

Ryan: Can I come?

Martha: No – it could be dangerous. ...

We fixed the socket and came back upstairs.

Me to Martha: It's done. Neil got a shock and passed out for a few minutes, but he's OK.

Neil: I'm still a little weak.

Martha didn't bother to give us a look.

10.5 Ryan stories

Ryan is at an age where I never know if he'll respond to something as a younger child or pre-teen, so I make myself ready for just about anything. ...

On the young child side we have...

- ~ playing with 4" high action figures
- ~ letting us give him hugs and pat him on the head
- ~ watching cartoons
- ~ enjoying foot races
- ~ getting scared over something
- ~ telling me the complete history of a live action, serialized, 1/2 hour weekday afternoon superhero show. ...

On the pre-teen side we have...

- ~ ogling adult gals in bikinis
- ~ attending to his hair
- ~ sporting sunglasses
- ~ wearing tennis shoes with some unnecessary stuff on them (the new ones have an extra layer that zips up)
- ~ zoning out with the radio

Ryan teeters with his radio choice. Sometimes it's the kid station, and sometimes it's early teen.

Notes about Ryan:

- 1) I never have to ask Ryan what he thinks of something, because he's already told me.
- 2) A sentence Ryan will never say: "I'm just not sure of this."
- 3) He says most things to me in an instructive, "Are you finally going to listen to me because I'm tired of explaining it" way. I know one of his lectures is coming when he puts two syllables in my name: "Da-ad..."
- 4) But Ryan still gives out lots of hugs, and he goes to hold my hand when crossing the street. Does my big guy have to grow up?

Karen: Ryan is a teenager-in-training.

Jimmy

Me: Hey guys, we've gotta look for Jimmy's hat.

Ryan: Where did he put it?

Ryan: Jim, what planet are you from: Unfamiliar With Things?

Jimmy: I can't find an eraser.

Ryan: Use the bottom of your shoe.

Jimmy: Ryan's saying that I'm his servant.

Ryan: No, he's just helping me do things.

Andy

Ryan: I'm teaching Andy karate.

Andy: Heda, ha.

Ryan: Baby, you drool. Do you know that?

Ryan, watching TV: Did Andy put this hat on my head?

Me: He did, yes.

Ryan: Thanks, baby.

Karen

Karen: Can you run to the quick shop and get milk?

Ryan: Sure. Wait – the quick shop doesn't have milk.

Ryan: Hey, look at this.

He showed his Nan a big ball of fuzz.

Karen: Did you pull that out of the couch?

Ryan: Yeah – there's a lot in there.

Ryan, on my phone message: Dad, can I get your permission to ride my bike?

It's raining and Nan won't let me.

Jack

Me: Let's think.

Ryan: Oh man, I hate it when you say that. It always ends up in disaster.

Me: Ryan, I've got a –

Ryan: No – no way!

Me: What?

Ryan: You're gonna burp! You always burp when you have that look.

Ryan: This whole house has gone completely baby. Even Dad's got a soft spot on his head.

Jimmy: Ryan, your breath smells like a skunk.

Ryan: Your breath smells worse than a skunk.

Jimmy: Yours smells like a garbage can.

Ryan: Yeah, well, you don't know which shoe to put on which foot.

Me: We've got to drop off Ander.

Ryan, imitating Andy: Dad, would you stop calling me Ander?

Me: Hey, baby talked!

Ryan as Andy: It was that stupid nickname.

Ryan: Did you know somebody wrote bad words for “On Top of Old Smokey”?

Me: We don’t need to hear ‘em.

Ryan: Can we go there?

Me: Yeah, we can do that.

Ryan: You’re kidding!

And he fell straight over like a tree timbbbering.

Ryan: ...and that ain’t what –

Me: Isn’t, not ain’t.

Ryan: We’re in a big city, Dad. Chicago, California, New York – they say ain’t.

Me: Hmm.

Ryan: George Washington said ain’t.

Me: Do you want to go with us?

Ryan: Unh unh.

Me: Why not?

Ryan: I’ve got a reputation to keep up.

10.6 Mom profile

If there were only one symbol for my mother, it would be the sun. Mom brings a warm glow to any room she enters, and she's our family's central source of energy.

Mom...

~ was the first to say, "We can go out, but it'll have to be someplace that takes a credit card."

~ has been described as looking like a movie star.

~ says things like, "Doug, please get this out of here. I'm tired of looking at it."

~ maintains an orderly and clean world despite all our efforts.

~ prefers shopping at family businesses over chains.

~ reads a lot of historical novels.

~ tracks the family's history.

~ loves to laugh and tell funny true stories.

~ took care of her mother in our home for the last three months of her life.

~ enjoys walking around neighborhoods and commenting about what gets done to homes.

~ always has an assignment for a family visitor. "Oh, I'm glad you're here! You can help me..."

1930s-40s

Mom was born in Alton, a hilly working class town just north of St. Louis. Mom's parents instilled two powerful – though opposite – capabilities into their only daughter.

1) Her mother could handle any situation.

2) Her father made friends very easily.

Put them together, and Mom came away well equipped to manage life and help those around her.

Robert Wadlow, the tallest man in history (8' 11"), grew up in Mom's town – but he was 18 years older than Mom. He passed away when Mom was three.

Mom: My mother said I saw the Alton giant, but I only remember her telling me I did.

Mom showed Ryan a newspaper picture of her as a young girl at a school picnic. Mom was storing her food up in the branches to protect it from ants.

Ryan: When was this?

Mom: 1945.

Ryan: So on the news they said, "Little girls are hanging their lunches from trees. Now back to World War II."

In grade school, Mom received a warning on her conduct grade: She talked too much.

1950s

Mom married Dad! The newlyweds pulled into a parking place and Mom gave Dad some dimes for the meter.

Dad: These are Mercury dimes – they’re valuable.

Mom: I got them out of the bowl on your dresser.

Dad: My coin collection?

Mom enjoyed Broadway show albums much more than rock and roll. Her favorite movies were musicals.

1960s

By tradition, Mom had the life of a homemaker, but she wanted more for her family and herself. So, Mom taught kindergarten four years, and substituted for another 30 years. Even decades later, former kindergartners saw my mom and said she was their favorite teacher.

Did Dad want Mom to work? Sure! Luckily, he didn’t have that stupid male pride, and they never played out a bad “no wife of mine is going to work” movie scene.

Mom has been a very good cook for years. But we had our “improvement decades.” For example, in the early 1960s, Mom learned that inside a store-bought turkey there’s a plastic bag full of gizzards and organs. Yes, Mom baked these in the turkey.

(We’ll return to the food topic on occasion.)

On my first day of grade school, Mom cried, because all her babies were growing up.

1970s

Al came up with the nickname Ma Brackitt. It fit, considering our home was a lot like a boarding house. People were coming and going all the time, and many weren’t in the family. Mom restructured the family routine around this hubbub. For example, we stopped having the evening family dinner, and the Brackitt brothers ate cereal almost constantly.

But we did have a Sunday dinner, and the roast was Mom’s ultimate challenge. How could the meat get juicy on the inside without being tough on the outside? It took years of work, dozens of experiments, and then...Mom was saved by the crock-pot.

Mom: I just threw it in there and that was that.

Mom crocheted, and did crewelwork, needlepoint and macramé. She donated a number of afghans to local charity auctions, and she paid close attention to how much people bid for them.

Mom wrote a story about the peculiar goings on in our house, sent it to famed humorist Erma Bombeck, and Erma printed it in her column! An example of what Mom wrote: The Brackitt family was in church that morning, and her son Al said he saw a man wanted for a felony.

I felt sick at school, and Mom came to pick me up.
Mom: Let's go someplace nice for lunch.
Suddenly, I felt better. Lunch in a restaurant, sure!

Mom always orders the house dressing, because she likes to experience something different.

Mom has played bridge for over 40 years. Quick notes on that:
~ When I was five, I thought Mom and her lady friends built an actual bridge.
~ Mom went on a cruise, participated in a big bridge tournament, and came in first place.
~ Currently, Mom belongs to seven bridge clubs.
~ Once, Mom and a group went to out to play bridge, and nobody remembered to bring decks of cards.

I sometimes got Mom in trouble – though she might not have known it. For example, on vacation in Canada I informed Mom that this famous TV fisherman was staying at the same lodge we were.
Mom: I heard him say he didn't like eating fish – that's rather odd. ...

I went down to the shore and saw the big celebrity.
Me: My Mom said you don't like to eat fish, and it's odd.
Fisherman, a little flustered: Yes, tell your mother I got in a lot of trouble for saying that.
I didn't tell Mom, and I spent the rest of the trip hoping they wouldn't meet.

Mom bought brother Doug hockey equipment, put it on her credit card, and carried the debt for nine years. (Mom kept a lot of credit card companies happy.)

Mom kept a close relationship with her parents and her only living grandmother.
~ Grandad, Mom's father, balanced Mom's checkbook – almost a full-time job. In 1978, Mom gave her Dad a calculator for Christmas. He didn't even have an adding machine. Grandad immediately took to this new digital device, and made a big production out of buying new batteries for it.
~ Gram, Mom's mother, discussed Alton-related people and things with her daughter.
Gram: Oh, I read that they were getting married. It'll never last.
Gram: Oh, I read that he died. He had one foot in the grave and another on a banana peel.

~ Mutte, Mom's grandmother, told us great-grandsons many entertaining stories, and Mom made sure we visited her a lot. Someday, I'll retell Mutte's captivating tales of life in the late 19th and early 20th century. For example, Mutte talked about where she was when she heard McKinley was shot. She was hanging up her laundry.

Mom is a member of a university women's group, and they met in the same building as an alcohol recovery group. New attendees to either group got mixed up and sat in the wrong meetings for long periods.

1980s

Mom paid for my Dad's bass club newsletter and wrote a little note on their bill: "My husband likes your magazine." The next month, Mom's sentence was featured in their Letters section.

Mom takes up causes. Here's a story in six parts:

1) She got Dad a pair of sneakers, but they didn't fit him. So, Mom gave the sneakers to Doug and he took them to his apartment.

2) Doug learned that the sneakers were too big, and he told Mom so.
Mom: Next time you go to Chicago, give them to Johnny.

3) Doug, arriving in Chicago: Here – Mom keeps telling me to give you these sneakers. I'm glad you've got them.

4) But the sneakers were too small for me.
Mom, on the phone: Are you wearing those sneakers? They're very nice.
Me: No, I can't wear them because they're too small.
Mom: When you come into St. Louis, give them to Al. Maybe we should've given them to him first.
Yes, maybe!

5) Eight months later, I carried the shoes back to St. Louis and dropped them with Al. But he quickly looked them over, said they wouldn't fit him (he didn't even try them on), and handed them back to me. I was stuck! Back to Chicago went the shoes and me. Of course, Mom called and asked me the status on the sneakers, and I had to disappoint her again.

Mom: Well, those are expensive sneakers. Let's think of someone else who is that shoe size.

I thought: Oh, man. Now I'm supposed to mail the shoes to distant relatives?
The shoes sat.

6) About three months later, our building was having a clothing drive. I donated the shoes to that, and I boldly told Mom what I did.
Mom: Well, that was the best thing to do.

More than anyone else, Mom taught me to 1) recognize what's right, and 2) stand up for it – no matter the consequences. On many occasions, Mom has demonstrated the tremendous power of being the *only* one to stand up and say, “No – it shouldn't be that way.”

After we were in college, Mom and Dad looked for every reason to travel. I didn't try to keep track of them. One year they went to Mexico, and Mom bought a sombrero. On the label was written, “Made in Korea.”

For many years, Mom was a secretary of our neighborhood's historical society. Dad called it the hysterical society.

Mom loved becoming a grandmother. She now has five – two girls and three boys. Grandma is famous for her “squeezy hugs.”

Ryan: Grandma and I play checkers. I always think of strategies to beat her, but I never can.

Jimmy: She warms up my heart.

Andy: Ga.

1990s

In 1997, the greatest loss in Mom's life occurred. My father passed away. This is not my story to tell, so I'll awkwardly go on to the next paragraph.

Mom enjoys her new Chesterfield, MO (a west St. Louis suburb) town home, partly because she doesn't have to shovel snow, mow grass or paint shutters. She did plenty of that when her sons were teenagers.

Mom is a Eucharistic minister – a server – at her church. One time, I helped her clean up afterwards.

Me: There's all this extra holy wine – should I pour it out?

Mom: No! You can't do that. Drink it.

So I did.

Mom has different types of conversations with each of her sons. Examples of discussions she has:

Al: His friends that he sees.

Sam: The old neighborhood.

Doug: His office.

Me: Writing.

Just this morning, Mom and I went out to breakfast, and the manager from her supermarket was there alone. Mom invited him to sit with us, and we had a lively conversation.

I spoke before about what my grandparents gave Mom – their daughter – and their best gift was longevity. On her mother's side, here's how old some of them lived to be. Mom's...

Great-great-great-grandmother: 89

Great-great-grandmother: 99

Grandmother: 98

Mother: 83

This guarantees my mother's sun will shine on all of us for decades to come.

10.7 Drink

Ryan

Memory from when Ryan was three: He called my bouillon “Dada’s chicken coffee.”

Ryan: Do you want some pink lemonade?

Me: No thanks.

Ryan: Can you get me some?

We were next to the car and Ryan poured his drink out...onto my shoe.

Jimmy

Jimmy: I love cream soda a million a million a million a million a million a million.

Jimmy: Mom, I got you a straw for your coffee.

I tipped back the two-liter wine jug and finished it off.

Jimmy: You drank that whole bottle?

Karen

Any time I compliment Karen on her coffee, it seems like we’re acting out a commercial.

Jack

These two liter soda bottles roll around in the trunk of my hatchback, and this had unforeseen consequences. I opened one in the kitchen, and the rolling had caused the soda to over-carbonate...and it shot out like a geyser. I put my mouth over the opening, letting the soda gush into me. My lungs ballooned.

I thought: Breathe through your nose!

It worked. So, there I was for a long five seconds, processing this soda.

I’m supposed to like that twice-as-expensive coffee because it’s so outrageously priced. Don’t tell anybody, but I don’t like it – it’s too acidic. Maybe if they double the price again I’ll have to like it.

A few years ago, Martha and Fritz gave us this \$275 bottle of wine, and – showing what connoisseurs we are – we kept it over the stove.

10.8 Halloween

Days before

At the grocery store, I knocked dirt off the pumpkin we were buying.

Ryan: Don't do that! You're going to jail. I'll visit you. Actually, I won't.

Jimmy: Can we go trick or treating in church?

By tradition, every son has worn the same fall outfit: an orange sweat suit with a pumpkin on the front. The orange color is washed out, the elastic is fleh, and the pumpkin is on Medicaid, but Andy looked good in it.

Jimmy: I know something that'll scare Mom for Halloween. Here, let me whisper it to you.

Me: What?

Jimmy: Give her a spider.

Jimmy: Mom, what are you going to be for Halloween?

Karen: I think I'll be a Mom.

Jimmy: Why don't you be a gorilla? Then you'll scare everyone at work.

Jimmy: Mom, I mean Dad, I was thinking about that haunted house we went to, and it got me scared. I definitely don't wanna go there again.

Me: But it might be fun.

Jimmy: It's not fun. They should tear that place down.

All Hallows Eve

For Halloween, the three boys dressed as popular characters from kids TV shows. On Saturday afternoon, Ryan attended a party and the littler ones went trick or treating. The retailers near us were giving out candy in the daylight hours, and that made for a fun and safe time.

Many of the storeowners got in the spirit of it by putting on costumes. There was a gypsy, a devil woman and a king. At least I think they were in costume.

On this journey, Andy spent most of the time on my shoulders, and Jimmy ran around enthusiastically. We went to a Chinese restaurant and they gave out fortune cookies. Unfortunately, I took Andy's from him when he wasn't looking. The fortune said, "Stop eating your children's food."

There was trick or treating at the bars, so the hard-bitten drinkers could see what it would be like if their families hadn't left them.

Afterwards

For me, Halloween means secretly rooting through the kids' candy.

Ryan: Andy shouldn't have all that candy.

Me: What should we do with it all?

Ryan: I didn't get much at that party.

10.9 Wrestling

The boys and I like to get our exercise by wrestling on the attic floor. Here's some information on that.

Pre-match

Among the rules: The boys aren't allowed to grind my head into the floor, put their feet in my face or take my wallet.

Me: Andy, you wanna wrestle?

He got a big smile, put his arms in front of him and danced around.

Andy: Grrr!

Jimmy: I wish we lived in the Stone Age.

Me: Why?

Jimmy: 'Cause then I'd wrestle dinosaurs.

Me: Wouldn't they hurt you?

Jimmy: No, 'cause I'd wrestle little ones.

Match

Andy doesn't wrestle us in a traditional way. He mostly sits in my lap, or we run in a circle while holding hands. Andy's favorite part of wrestling is getting a drink of water.

Me: Jimmy, what name do you wrestle under?

Jimmy: Kong Fu.

Me: What name does Daddy wrestle under?

Jimmy: Stupid Fu.

Ryan punched me hard.

Ryan: Ow, my hand!

He needed to check if his finger was all right, so he punched me again.

Ryan: Eh, it's OK.

Ryan pulled the rug out from under me (literally), threw it over me, and then did "flying jumps" onto me.

To taunt me, Jimmy called me a "luluhead triple ninny pants ice cream with stupid sugar and a jerk cherry on top."

The boys have names for various moves:

1. Wah chah moozie-dah spin, hit
2. Chopathon
3. Mini-saka toogie taka [one that Andy did]
4. Motorcycle blast punch complete with rocket

5. Yah!

Jimmy, excited: Dad, my heart's about to come out!

Post-match

Me: Could you explain the chopper spinout again to me?

Jimmy: Dad, I told you to listen very carefully once, and I wasn't gonna tell you twice.

10.10 Memories

Ryan

Ryan: How did you and Nan meet?

Me: There's this real popular free newspaper in Chicago. I took out a classified ad to meet somebody like Nan. She answered, and then we got married.

Ryan: Do they just give you gals to choose from?

Memory of Ryan at three:

Ryan: It's just a wittle bit.

Me: A wittle bit?

Ryan: Not wittle bit, wittle bit.

Ryan: I can remember when I was one.

Me: What was life like then?

Ryan: Pretty darned easy.

I heard this song on the radio.

Me to Ryan: Remember when you were about four, and we'd sing this song?

Ryan, eating popcorn: A wra wo wa wa.

Me: What?

Ryan: Ar wro wa wra.

Here's Ryan at 4 1/2, right before the arrival of Jimmy.

Ryan: Can we name the baby Light Bulb?

Me: That's silly. Why Light Bulb?

Ryan: Nobody's named that.

Ryan when he was three:

Me: How old is Daddy?

Ryan: 15.

Me: How old is Nan?

Ryan: Nan is very, very old.

Ryan: Jim, don't get mad, don't get sad, and don't get teary eyed. When you were born, I was at the hospital, and I saw a woman who was an alien, and she gave birth to a baby just like you. And then I saw you get switched.

Jimmy: Eh, thumbs down.

Me: I remember when Ryan was this little baby.

Ryan: Hey, I was never a baby.

Me: What about those pictures of you from nine years ago?

Ryan: I was exploring my inner child.

Jimmy

Jimmy: When I was a baby, did I sign my own contract?

Me: What for?

Jimmy: For the United States to hang up.

Me: Why would they need that?

Jimmy: To write my name, my address and my street number.

Me, processing this: "To write my name, my address –"

Jimmy: Mine, not yours.

Me: Is that like a birth certificate?

Jimmy: What's a birth certificate?

Me: It shows you're a legal person.

Jimmy: That's not it then.

On Jimmy's first birthday he sat on my lap, and Karen gave him that special first slice of cake. But I didn't know it was for Jimmy, and I ate it.

Me: Why are you bald in this baby picture?

Jimmy: I got a haircut.

Karen

Karen showed Ryan pictures from when she was a child.

Ryan: Did you have gray hair then, too?

Me: What was it like in my mom's tummy?

Jimmy: It was so tiring. I built a chair so I could sit down.

Jimmy: I liked it in my mom's tummy.

Ryan: You don't remember that.

Me: Andy would have the best memory of that.

Ryan: Yeah, but the doctors hypnotized him, so he doesn't know anymore.

Jack

I'm glad to hear you went to Reelfoot Lake. I remember going there 25 years ago, and I complained that they only had two TV stations. Wrestling was on one channel, and caged wrestling was on the other.

Me: Jimmy, can't you give a piece of chocolate to your dear old dad?

Jimmy: Unh uh, no!

Me: I, the man who was in the hospital when you were born?

Ryan: You weren't there. You were watching TV.

Me: I was at the hospital!

Jimmy: I don't remember you there.

Family

Kids get a lot of understanding about the world before they can speak. At 18 months, Jimmy had tug of wars with Ryan, even though Jimmy could only say

“Mogh!” and similar statements. Of course, Jimmy thought he was using real words – choice ones at that.

Jimmy: I remember Ryan when he was a baby.

Me: You weren’t born, so how do you remember?

Jimmy: I remember everything.

Me: Really.

Jimmy: My job was to shine stars.

Me: That’s what your Grandpa always said about you guys – “You were there shining the stars.”

Jimmy: I know.

10.11 Chicago profile: Structures

Pre-note: This focuses a lot on North Chicago structures rather than Loop ones, because all the Loop schtuff is in the Loop section.

Also, when I'm talking about North Chicago I'm often quietly referencing places on Belmont – a boisterous E-W street four miles north of the Loop. Belmont is non-touristy, but a lot of things happen there.

Buildings

Most of Chicago was built in the past.

The majority of the buildings in Chicago are beige. There are so many shades of light brown, it makes me jumpy. Every structure looks like it came out of a tanning booth.

Walk around and you'll see block after block of three-story buildings, and some have retail on the first floor.

Stating the obvious: The city's resurgence is bringing new generations into old buildings. Luckily, most of the early 1900s places are sturdy, so they've survived the decades and are ready for rehabbing.

There's a new building under construction – but it's been sitting half-done for years. There's probably an ongoing fistfight between developers, property owners, neighborhood groups, estates, lawyers, and the government.

There's a building with an exterior made out of foam. It's true! The structure appears to be gray-stone, but I saw it before the cover-up paint went on and it's foam. I've seen how they maintain it: When a hole gets punched into their wall they just gloob it over.

Buildings on the west and south sides look very 1890-1925. Here's a story: Al and I stood in front of Al Capone's apartment on the west side in the town of Cicero. Then we drove the same streets Scarface would have driven to his Mom's house on the south side – he cooked spaghetti there on Sunday nights. (True!) I'm sure Capone would have recognized 60% of the buildings along the way – it hasn't changed all that much. Everyone complimented Al on his spaghetti sauce, and we would have too.

There are actual officey office buildings in the North Chicago retail areas, but most are maximum six stories tall. Isn't it funny how those can appear tall in their surroundings, but they'd be dwarfish next to a 60-story Loop building.

The off-the-wall idea can see reality. On the side of one building, there are two life-size statues of business people climbing up with ropes.

The Chicago school system allows teens to choose from different types of high schools, including ones for computers and military service.

There's an old motel. A lot of them are still running full tilt, and some even have hourly rates.

Public services

Since the city is overstuffed with people, there's a notable plethora of government services. In each direction, there's a huge branch library and a post office. They have the extra assistance and longer hours I'd only expect to see downtown.

Banks

Banks advertise that they'll make loans to cab drivers to get their medallions. These make the cabbies independents who can start their own operations.

Late one night, I was at a bank's ATM – inside the little room assessable by swiping my card. This guy knocked on the door, waved that he couldn't get inside, and I stupidly let him in.

Guy: You'll be sorry you did that.

Me, jumping out of my skin: Yeah?

Guy, without showing gun or knife: I just need a few dollars.

Me, relieved and walking out: Oh jeeze, forget it.

Guy: Now wait – could you just –

Me, yelling: Get away from me man, that's it!

Guy, turning away: Oh come on man!

I needed to make a drop-box deposit at this bank, but they had no envelopes for me. So, I took a page from one of the free newspapers, folded my check into it, scribbled a little deposit message, and dropped it into the box. Two days later, my transaction hadn't gone through, and I called the bank in a panic.

Me: Yes...my check was the one wrapped in newspaper.

Bank person: Oh, OK. We didn't know what you wanted with that.

All right – I deserve the blame for depositing the check that way. But what else did they think that was?

Residences

High-rises

Close as possible to the water, there are these 60-story condos with views of either the lake, the city or the wall of another building. The people who reside in the high-rises near the lake are different from the ones who live in three-story structures only a few blocks in.

Many of the high-risers are quiet, ordinary, wealthy and keep-to-themselves types. Many of the no-risers are fun, offbeat, unwealthy and ready-to-drink-coffee types.

SRO

There's a Single Resident Occupancy (SRO) apartment building/hotel. Often, these places have a sign out in front: "Transients Welcome." Older, single people like them. An SRO has...

- ~ a lot of one room, 12'x12' efficiency apartments
- ~ bathrooms down the hall
- ~ a little kitchenette with a curtain to wall it off

In the old days, there was a Murphy bed retracted to the wall. Friend Marco has a Murphy bed in his multi-room apartment, but he hasn't murphed it up in years. ...

The SRO near us looks inviting now – it's a high quality rehab. But four years ago, it was a real fleabag operation. One night we threw Al out of our house, so he got a room at that hotel.

Al: In the middle of the night this guy banged on my door and was screaming for Ricky. I think Ricky was off writing his doctoral thesis.

Rehabs

There's an apartment complex that used to be a brewery, and it's a landmark. The company did well in the 1950s/60s, because they had the idea of putting supermarket names on beers and selling them in those stores. If there was a Glymfz Supermarket, this brewery made Glymfz Beer for them.

There's a big old manufacturing plant. Some years back, they planned to convert this factory into condos. We went in their sales office and saw that the homes were about 40% sold – shown by the red dots on their wall diagram. This turned out to be a curious mystery, because the development never got going. Then someone wise informed me: They just put up red dots to lure in unsuspecting prospects.

While shopping for a space, I was shown a building euphemistically described as "artists' lofts."

Building owner, thinking: This space is so dilapidated – it's a giant mess. How about this – I'll divide it up and talk artists into renting there. They'll take anything.

Some aspects of this place:

1. The rooms were way too big, unless we were parking airplanes.
2. Plywood separated the units.
3. The air whistling through caused microclimates.
4. The ceilings were 16 feet high, so for heat we'd have to walk on stilts.

Development

North Chicago is indeed on the rise. Once in a blue moon, a developer will offer to tear down our house and put up condos. I always say to them, “Not unless you pay us.”

Construction is one the biggest issues in North Chicago. You would’ve liked seeing a developer’s presentation I watched. He was a grandfatherly type – wore a rumpled sport-coat and a warm demeanor. He had rights to 10 acres close by, and he wanted to put up...950 condos. The audience gasped – 950 units on just 10 acres? Luckily, grandpy didn’t succeed.

Chicago has new homes with ambitious designs, but by the time the homeowners pay the architects, they’re down to using cinder blocks everywhere.

Retail

About once a year, I’ll be in a store and some crazy guy will be yelling for no reason. If a year passes and nobody screams, I’ll start yelling – just to end the drought.

Chicago is better for the independent retailer, because the town is so overcrowded there are enough people to frequent the smaller stores. For example, on a diagonal city street there will be a 1940s-era neon sign for a shoe store, and gracious: A shoe store is still going strong in there. It’s appealing in a way that nothing new can be.

A huge home repair place operates 24 hours. It’s the highest volume store in their national chain. Friend Lou Morgan – the home remodeler – arrives there at 6:00 am with his crew, and they pick up everything they’ll need for the day.

Enrichment

There’s a place that sells these kitchy little plastic toys – the ones I wanted to own as a child but I didn’t have the money. Now, since these items are priced six times more than their original cost, I still can’t afford them.

There’s a florist who sells roses for \$8.99, and around Valentine’s Day, they raise the price to \$14.99.

There’s a knitting store. You love macraneedlecross, so I’m sure you’d enjoy taking a class here. In junior high, I made a potholder that became a scarf.

There’s a “make all your pottery here” place. They have the wheel, clay, paint, ovens, etc. And they clean up the mess.

There are “Happily Celebrating Frivolity” shops. They sell handmade cards, wooden toys, nibbly candies, and little knick-knackies...and they burn aroma

candles. One store sells everything of one color – pink. Another store sells things from a particular country. They have their magazines, chocolate bars, clothing accessories and snack crackers.

There's an antique row. These stores bring a calm to an area, because gangs won't hang in front of a Depression glassware display. Here are two mildly related notes:

~ Gram was always surprised "that cheap green Depression glass" became a favorite for collectors.

~ I'm taken aback when items from my youth are presented as antiques.

There's a store that's so mysterious, I can't figure out what they sell, and I wonder if they know.

There's a big athletic club. Outside, they have one of those fake mountain sides climbers go up and down on. In the middle of January, city mountain climbers can pretend they're on Mount Everest, but nobody is ever out there.

~ An old-time bowling alley that still has a human who sets up the pins.

Another sign of the times in our neighborhood: The big computer retail store shut down, and in went a flower-power organic juice bar. True!

Essentials

There's a service station that displays all the services they don't provide:

No checks

No restrooms

No change given

No large bills

There are three futon stores close to each other, and they fiercely competed. I'd have thought futon store owners would be into peace and love, but not so here – it's war for them.

There's a big, old Catholic church. A Pope has been there.

There's a custom-carved furniture place. The beds look like those in the fairy tales – curvy, ornate and one-of-a-kind. They're built by Chicago's elf immigrants.

There's a car dealership. They park new cars illegally on the street, and they don't care if the cars get tickets. Reason: These unsold vehicles aren't yet registered with the state, so the citations are meaningless.

Dozens of stores serve the non-English-speaking-population. Their signs are written in the native language and lettering, and only some of them show the English translation.

Chicago has the world's largest public library building.

This sign-making store put up a huge sign in their window – they don't like their long distance provider. The moral is: Never mess with a sign place, because they'll really get the last word.

Two veterinary clinics specialize in treating cats.

Regarding haircuts, Chicago has a...

- ~ place that specializes in braiding.
- ~ barber who only gives military haircuts, and he's not near a base.
- ~ lot of unisex hair salons. Chicago has many unisex people.

Video

There's an independent video store. Once I rented a film from them, took it home, and discovered it was the wrong movie.

Me, returning it: This is the wrong film. Could I get my money back?

Clerk: It's a good movie, and you've had it more than two hours. You might've watched the whole thing.

Me: Well, I didn't.

Clerk: It's a funny movie.

A few years ago, somebody put in a video rental store close to us, and that was cause for celebration. Unfortunately, the owner took all his worst movies from his other store and displayed them at our place. I couldn't go in there and keep my self-respect. They closed five months later.

There are international video rental stores. They display posters of big global movie stars – none of whom I recognize.

One store has a weird policy: They make renters pay when they return the movie. It's a total hassle – I can't just put movies in the drop box. Nobody in the store had a logical reason for this policy.

There are plenty of giant stuffed animals (sometimes gorillas) in front of video stores and car washes.

We get to rent movies from the most famous independent video store in the Midwest – it's the favorite of film critics. They have a large mail order business. If an Idaho film professor wants to rent an obscure international film he goes through a big procedure, and we just walk down the street. It's a cinematic perk.

Wrigley Field

When I was a kid, Dad told me about this major league baseball park that was really old – it was right in the middle of a neighborhood. I was shocked, because modern was in. Now, Wrigley is in and I'm out.

Here are some non-baseball reasons Wrigley is great:

- ~ It was completed in 1914, and it was a huge stadium for its time.
- ~ Fans can sit close to the field. Those are life-size players out there, not microcosms. Microcosms do make up the players, however.
- ~ Age. There are some new old style parks, but this is an *old* old park.
- ~ Wrigley sneaks up on you. It's in the middle of typical city streets and houses.
- ~ As everyone knows, there are condos with rooftop seating. Fans watch the games without paying admission, and they have a fun time unless they fall off.
- ~ Non-commercialism. They didn't pull down the ivy on the outfield walls in order to put up billboards.
- ~ The retail shops cater to tourists, sports fans and partiers. Someone who's all three might spontaneously combust.

Health places

There's a spa. Before, I didn't quite understand what happened in spas. But then a bunch of highly introspective women's drama shows came on TV, and I learned.

There's an unassuming looking doctor's office. It seems these doctors and dentists can go into a storefront, cover their windows, hardly promote themselves at all, and do well enough to stick around forever.

There's a chiropractor's office. They have a night deposit for blood and urine samples, but I haven't left any.

There's a new large drugstore. They got permission from the city to use the alley as a second exit. Everyone cooperated, because if the drugstore pulled out, a super-sized 24-hour quick shop would have gone in, and that meant people buying whiskey at 2:00 am.

11. November

11.1 Timeline

Jimmy and Ryan helped me rake leaves, and I flipped a coin to see who could leap into the leaf pile first. Ryan won, but then a frustrated Jimmy immediately ran, jumped into the pile and sent leaves everywhere.

Ryan: Ahhh! I was first!

Me: OK, Ryan – Jimmy didn't start from one end of the yard, so his wasn't the official first jump. Go ahead.

Jimmy: Ahhh! I want the first jump!

So, there were some problems. However, later I got a photo of them covered with leaves – just their heads were sticking out – so it went fine overall.

Today, there was an election. When I don't know any of the candidates, I always vote for the one with a nickname. He or she would have to be a better person.

This morning at 3:55 am, the doorbell rang furiously, and someone was banging repeatedly on the downstairs door. I thought Karen must have been outside for some reason and got locked out. I scrambled downstairs, and it turned out to be a highly panicked woman.

Woman: My son's having seizures! I've got to get something!

Me: You want me to call 911?

Woman: No! He needs a prescription! My husband, he told me to go and ask people! I need twelve dollars!

Karen, from upstairs: Jack, what is it?

Me: Hang on!

The woman's story was a fake. Over the years, at least six people have rushed up to me with a hyper-dramatic stories that ended with them needing money. I defend these artists, because at least they're working to earn a living. Taking the street dramatists one-by-one, there was the...

~ Very poorly dressed man in the park who said his car was stalled on the highway, and he needed money.

~ Nicely dressed lady who said her car was stalled on the highway, and she needed money.

~ Electrician-looking guy who said his truck was stalled on the other street, and he needed money. He even showed me a frayed wire that came from the vehicle.

~ Lady who said her purse was stolen and she couldn't believe she was out front of the train station asking for money.

~ Man who rang our door, said his car was stalled nearby, and he needed money.

~ Yuppie-looking guy who interrupted his cell phone "conversation" to tell me about the weird predicament he was in.

11.2 Andy at 16 months

Karen put Andy into his room in order to take his nap, and then Karen left. Poor Andy kept crying, so I picked him up, sat with him in the family room, gave him his bottle and watched him start nodding off.

Karen, entering the room: Jack, you should let the baby sleep.

I was standing in the closet and the baby kept wanting to walk in. So, I blocked him.

Me: No, baby, no. You're not coming in here.

He shut the door and put me in the closet.

11.3 Circle update

Friend Nikos is coming into town. He's a computer whiz, so I'll ask him to check over my machine. Here are samples of what he'll say:

"What did you do to this thing?"

"I'm amazed it's still working."

"Oh, the dust."

"Get a new one, my friend."

"A new hard drive would cost \$129.98, and you can get a \$25 rebate through the 31st of this month, but you need a form. I happen to have one with me."

"I suggest you finally do what we in the civilized world are doing."

Years ago, Nikos showed me his online forum for computer experts. He stepped away for a moment and left me in control. Using Nikos' name, I sent out this question: "What's a modem?"

Nikos, angry: You have me asking all those computer people a stupid question like that?!

11.4 Sam Brackitt profile

Here's the story of my Brother Sam. Following are some regards.

Regarding physical profile, Sam is...

- ~ as old as a person born around 1960.
- ~ the tallest Brackitt, and single.
- ~ usually holding a cup of coffee.
- ~ questionable with facial hair. When I next see him, he might have a goatee.
- ~ a lifelong St. Louisan.

Regarding personality, Sam is...

- ~ an unusual intellectual.
- ~ the most composed of the four brothers.
- ~ the most individualistic person I know who doesn't live in Montana.
- ~ on his own schedule. I don't know when he'll be asleep or awake.

Regarding capabilities, Sam is...

- ~ an expert on what's funny.
- ~ a cook. He argues with Mom over how to make gravy.
- ~ a creative thinker with few recognizable boundaries.

Regarding likes, Sam is...

- ~ always surrounded by newspapers and magazines.
- ~ a scandal lover. Give him a sensational news story and he's fueled for months.
- ~ immersed in creative projects. He paints, and writes country music songs.
- ~ most intrigued when reading celebrity court documents.

Recall

Of everyone I know, Sam comes the closest to having total recall.

Me: What happened to that electronic football game Al had?

Sam: That was a Christmas present in '73. Drew chewed up three pieces of it.

The rest went to a garage sale we had with the Como family in June of '75, and it sold for two dollars to a lady in her mid-40s. She wasn't from the subdivision.

Photography

Sam is a photographer, but he doesn't take those overly serious/artistic B&W photos of old women sitting on their porches immersed in shadows and light. This is better: Sam takes one 35 mm photo of his life once an hour on average. It's true! We'll be sitting in a restaurant, and Sam will quietly snap a picture of us. We don't even notice anymore. I haven't seen Sam's pictorial history, but Mom says it's comprehensive. He has over 11,000 photographs.

Exploration

Sam drives and walks everywhere in the late hours, and he has countless conversations with night people. He forms a quick bond with security guards, the homeless, and convenience store clerks. ...

This night owl network tells Sam what's going on in the area. When an event occurs in St. Louis, I'll sometimes hear Sam say, "Yeah, I went out there, and I talked with their security guard. He gave me the whole story."

Timeline

1960s

Sam was brought into the world in a curious fashion. It wasn't an emergency, but the hospital still drugged Mom to unconsciousness.

Mom: I remember waking up and they handed Sam to me. That's how they did things then.

1965s

Sam dropped two eggs on the floor to show me that live chicks were in there.

After bath time, Sam was best at combing his hair so it looked like TV star Jack Lord's flip-up coif.

The drug store sold amazingly cheap grooming lotion, and Sam applied lots of it. Mom was a teacher at Sam's school.

Mom: I'd be up the hall from Sam's classroom and I could smell his hair oil.

1970s

Mom made a bundt cake. Sam didn't like the icing, so he tunneled halfway into the inside part, then carefully reshaped everything to cover up his work.

Mom, yelling an hour later: Who hollowed out my cake?!

Sam's teacher brought a towel to class, and it had the name of a hotel chain on it. She said it was a gift.

We loved the most senior members of the family, and they took a particular liking to Sam. One reason: Sam listened to all their stories of the olden days. Thank goodness, someone with a superior memory heard their accounts, because now Sam passes them on.

Sam and I were riding our bikes to the store, and I fell and hit my chin badly. Sam looked back, saw my plight, and took me to a house that was close by. Nobody answered. Sam then took me to another house and a man appeared. The man put cotton on my chin, and Sam called home. Dad took

me to the emergency room, and I got 13 stitches. Sam had Doug ride my bike home for me.

At age 11, Sam bought Cornish game hens from the store and roasted them.

Unique skill: Sam can put out his index finger like he's pointing, and he can bend the first joint (the one with the fingernail on it) – without moving anything else.

Sam was a champion little league baseball player. He won a lot of trophies and, like many similar child athletes, can still recite all of his stats. ...

Dad would watch Sam play – in his own way. Dad never sat with other parents or got into the rah-rah. He'd stand by his car, bend a little stick, and stay for a few innings. You'd have to know Dad, but he showed a lot of love for Sam by doing this.

We went to a low-rent Lincoln museum near St. Louis, and they had a series of roped-off rooms showing Abe's life at various stages. Sam snuck into one of the displays and crouched down. These pre-teen kids came in, stood behind the ropes and viewed the display, and Sam jumped out.

Sam: Rahhh!

Kids: Ahhh!

The kids ran for their parents, and Sam fled.

The construction site

Near us, they were putting up a giant apartment complex, and that kept us kids busy for years. Sam and I pulled materials out of the construction dump and built a clubhouse. It had a fireplace with asbestos tile, a secret entrance, and fiberglass insulation.

When the apartments were built, Sam and I rooted through their garbage dumpsters and found lots of junk. Mom hated everything we brought home...until we showed her this brass lamp, and it went into the master bedroom.

Mom, recently: That's still a nice lamp. I use it.

This bitter man started a pinball arcade near us. The owner didn't like Sam, and they gave each other a lot of grief. One morning, Sam found a deer head in a dumpster, and he put it in front of the owner's front door.

Vacations

Sam had a mild sleepwalking problem, and this was particularly troublesome when we stayed in motels on vacations. Once, he woke up outside our second floor room – out on the long outside walkway. He

didn't know which room was ours, so he banged on all the doors until it got resolved.

Sam, recently: Everyone opened their doors for me. That was definitely a different time.

We stayed at a high-rise hotel in the Loop, and Sam threw cups of urine out the window.

That hotel had an early version of pay TV, and Sam hot-wired the set so we kids could get all the movies without the parents knowing. One film had the father from a popular family TV show, and he was playing a foul-mouthed cop. It was an awakening for us.

On one vacation, Sam went sock-less for a week. He was sitting in the backseat and took off a shoe.

Dad: What stinks!?!

Sam quietly put the shoe back on, and things returned to normal.

Since he was 10, Sam has read newspapers cover to cover. On vacations, he'd pick up the local paper and peruse it in the car.

Sam: This town's got some real problems.

We were staying in a cabin at Reelfoot Lake. Sam set off a fire extinguisher in a bedroom, and it shot this powder everywhere – all over the walls, bed, etc. What to do? We kids shut the door and never used the room.

1975s

Our neighborhood had a target shoot that awarded the winner a frozen turkey. All these hunter-looking hunters came out and took their best shots. Then, in stepped a 15-year-old with shoulder-length feathered back hair, bell-bottoms, and a black concert shirt. He out-shot them all and won the turkey.

In the 1976 presidential election, Sam had a particular interest in the medical conditions of the candidates.

Sam, reading: He had a testicle removed – ouch.

Sam went a long time without a car, so he became adept at using our St. Louis bus system. This was notable, because nobody else rode those buses.

Sam only owned two albums, and he never listened to them.

Nancy Kelp, formerly on the hillbillies TV show, was performing at a dinner theater up the road from us. Sam happened to see her at the supermarket, and he watched her cash a personal check.

Sam, later: It went off without a hitch.

I used to stutter a lot, and Sam was the only one who never made fun of me.

Sam was always glad to join me on odd journeys. For example, St. Louis has a big local telethon every year – it includes a lot of celebrities. For three straight years, Sam and I went there and snuck into all the backstage/VIP areas. Sam had pleasant discussions with Sammy Davis Jr. and other stars.

1980s

We went to the 1982 World's Fair in Knoxville, TN, and they had this three-foot tall, rolling, talking ketchup bottle. It interacted with people, because a fellow was sitting somewhere with a remote control and a microphone. Sam had long conversations with this ketchup bottle.

Sam and Doug went to one concert. They were near the concession stand, and this large guy was harassing Doug.

Doug: Hey Sam!

Sam looked over and instantly hurled his 20-ounce cup of beer at the guy. It was very peculiar: Because Sam played baseball, he knew how to side-arm the beer in such a way that it stayed in the cup...until it hit that guy on the chest. Then the beer splurched up into the guy's face and doused him. This gave Doug and Sam enough time to leave the scene.

Sam bought a hatchback and, this being our neighborhood, someone threw a brick into his back window. This had an advantage during the winter, because pounds of snow fell into Sam's car and put much-needed weight over the back tires. Sure the car was cold, but it got around.

In college, Sam and I took an English class together, and we got almost nothing out of it. I take that back: Sam still does a good impersonation of the teacher.

1985s

I went to the basement, and on the ping-pong table there were these cardboard pyramids, and underneath them were lottery tickets – a Brother Sam project. And wouldn't you know but...he still didn't win.

Sam had a complex audio/video system going. All the equipment was old, and he had three of everything: tape decks, main consoles, equalizers, TVs and VCRs. They were all connected by a snarl of wires.

My tape deck broke, and in a brotherly way, I stole one of Sam's. Unfortunately, I didn't take it all the way to my car – I put it on the kitchen table.

Sam: What's my tape deck doing here?

Me, acting nonchalant: Hm.

Sam: I'd better put this back.

I learned my lesson, and six months later, I successfully re-stole the deck by taking it all the way to my car. He still doesn't know I have it.

1990s

Sam owns property in Wisconsin and New York. Specifically, he keeps a PO box in Milwaukee and a safety deposit box in Manhattan. Why? Sam keeps his reasons to himself, but he'll always give a friendly non-answer.

Me: Why do you keep a safety deposit box in Manhattan?

Answer 1: I've got a lot of stuff in that box.

Answer 2: You never know.

The Manhattan bank informed Sam they were going to relocate, and he had to transfer all his possessions to the new place within three months. The next day, Sam hopped in his car, drove the 21 hours to New York, and accomplished his task.

When I'm in St. Louis, Sam and I go to the quick shop in the middle of the night. We hang around there like everyone else with nothing to do, except we're adults.

Sam never watches entertainment television.

Before every Christmas, Karen says to me, "Don't worry – I know what to get Sam." She buys him those exotic canned meats that gather dust in the supermarket for five years. Sam opens the gift, nods in gratitude, and soon after starts whipping up appetizers for us.

Sam and Mom have traveled to numerous places in the St. Louis area. Sam took a photo of Mom standing next to a statue of 8'11" Robert Wadlow, and Mom was as tall as the giant's cane.

Sam doesn't have pay TV channels, but the cable company still sends the audio through. Sam listens to movies as he works on his projects.

I received two packages from Sam – blank videotapes. He wanted me to record as much as possible of the presidential impeachment hearings. Specifically, I was to tape three cable news channels simultaneously for at least six hours a day. ...

I had 18 sessions recorded, just ran out of tapes, and was ready to declare my job complete. Then, I got another big package of blank videotapes from Sam, plus \$20 so I could buy more.

Sam makes surprise visits to our home, and of course, we're delighted to see him. He always looks the same, except he's carrying a Chicago newspaper instead of a St. Louis one.

Every 10 years, Mom becomes concerned Sam won't get himself counted in the census. Reason: Mom is into genealogy and the census is a big part of that.

Sam is independent, and he's there for a family member in need. In 1990, I had to have my appendix taken out and was at the hospital. I called Mom. Mom: I'll send Sam up.

Sam drove through the night, and when I woke the next morning, he was sitting there. He brought me supermarket tabloids to read.

11.5 Baptism

Karen and I were anointed godparents for Brother Doug and Aunt Peggy's little Ava. To officially begin this duty, we took a three-day weekend trip to St. Louis.

Friday

We started our journey by walking to the minivan. Ryan carried my briefcase, and he looked like a 10-year-old computer whiz who's supporting the family.

We stopped in this country style restaurant with a buffet (there are several between Chicago and STL). This high school football team bus got there ahead of us. How can I say this delicately? Apparently, the football team members didn't have a restroom on their bus, so they stunk up the john, and it all wafted into the restaurant. That's enough of that story.

Ryan to the waitress: I'll have the buffet, and the cheeseburger platter.

Me: No way! One or the other.

Me, proudly: Ryan, if they knew you were going to eat that much at the buffet, they'd've put up a big sign: "No Ryan."

Ryan: They don't even know who I am.

Andy: Weraralalala. Mamama.

Jimmy: Mommy, I'm full. Can I have my sundae?

Me: One time, I was in our college cafeteria, and this guy at a bar bought this gal a drink, but he was standing at the salad bar and the drink was milk.

Ryan and Jimmy: Ha, ha, ha!

Jimmy: That's not funny.

Ryan: Yeah. It's stupid.

Jimmy: This ice cream tastes like gasoline.

Back in the car, I was driving.

Ryan: Can you turn on the kids' radio station?

Me: We're real far from picking that up.

Ryan: Just try.

I did, and of course, I got jzzzffffzzjjzffzz. I turned it off.

Ryan: Hey – turn it back on!

At a little after midnight, we made it to Ma Brackitt's house in the ultra-quiet subdivision. Of course, I laid on the horn to announce our arrival.

Saturday

At Grandma Alice's house, I made Andy waffles with margarine. He likes that, and it's better for him to smear margarine in his hair than syrup.

Andy: Wahhhh!

What was wrong? I tasted the waffles and ugh! That wasn't margarine – it was yellow shortening shaped like a stick of margarine. I say: Only butter and margarine can be shaped like a stick.

The circus

Saturday's big event was a trip to the circus. Brother Doug treated, but let's keep that quiet, because everyone thinks I contributed.

Karen drove out of Grandma's house, and a moment later, she needed to turn around in somebody's driveway.

Ryan: We're there already?

Ryan: Oh man, Andy's got lice.

Karen: No, that's just food in his hair.

Karen to Grandma: I like that it's not as cold here.

Ryan: Nan, it's "ain't" as cold.

We arrived at Brother Doug and Aunt Peggy's house.

Doug: Did you see our newest addition?

Me: Sure, Karen's holding baby Ava right now.

Doug: I meant my new car.

We had a big game of chase-me in the yard, and Eva was an active participant. She could put quite a wild look on her face.

It took two minivans to get our circus to the circus.

Me to Ryan: You want to borrow my jacket?

Ryan: And look like one of the clowns?

The circus...

~ was held in St. Louis' hockey stadium. I'm glad they melted the ice beforehand.

~ knows what the parents have to buy there. For example, we paid \$10 for two bags of cotton candy.

We all sat together about 30 rows up. There were different rings, and at least two would have stuff going on...unless there was a big activity in the middle.

Jimmy, giving play by play: She likes to do high wire flipping, and dangerous flipping and spinning.

Ryan believes the tigers are mechanical, and an electric force controls them through the whip.

Me: Jimmy, would you jump through a circle of fire?

Jimmy: Oh no way! I'd be like [and he wiggled furiously].

They had a clown circus, and one performer carried a foam rubber alligator.

Ryan: That's fake.

Three teams of horses came charging out.

Karen: Wow!

Ryan: Nan! That's very embarrassing.

We saw these ladies getting spun around by their hair, 30 feet off the ground. I later asked friend Valentina, a performance artists' agent, how much these women usually make.

Valentina: Maybe \$40,000 a year.

What a deal! All that money – just to get spun by your hair.

The trapeze artists were performing death-defying high-wire acts, and when they stood up top, I could see that they were partaking in casual conversation.

Trapezer 1: No news with me. Let's get some coffee after –

Trapezer 2: Hold that thought. I'll be back in a second.

We watched the elephants go around the ring.

Jimmy: Do they really want the elephants to do that?

Me: Sure, that's what they do.

Jimmy: I mean poop.

There was a high wire act where a man sat on a chair – impressive. To make a long story short, the two workers standing below were only there to save the chair.

Me: They're going to shoot those two people out of cannons!

Jimmy: All right!

Ryan: Eh, we'll see.

I didn't know the human cannonball is The Big Thing at a circus, but the circus company definitely knows it. They had an elaborate pre-shoot-out-of-the-cannon ceremony, and I could feel the "kid buzz" heighten.

Jimmy, crossing his arms and becoming angry: They're not shooting anyone out of a cannon.

Me: Just wait, Jimmy.

Then the performers crawled into the barrels and boom! Out they went, straight into big nets.

Jimmy: Woo hoo!

Karen: They really did it!

Ryan: I still don't think so.

Sunday

Jimmy: I think Ava's nervous about being baptized.

Ryan: Yeah, right. Getting water poured on your head is tough.

We all went into the church. Unfortunately, Al scalded his hand because he touched the holy water.

Sam was in charge of videotaping, but his battery gave out. No problem: The priest lent him a super-long extension cord. It was plugged in behind the altar, so Sam's camerawork came from a higher power.

Baby Ava was very good and pretty throughout the baptism.

Ryan's flight

Ryan flew back early because he had school on Monday. His airline ticket was one of those rectangular beige cards with useless information everywhere. It was impossible to figure it out. Did his flight leave at 455 pm, or was it Flight 455?

Jimmy: One time my friend Tommy's plane was 200 hours late.

Monday

We said thanks and goodbye to Ma Brackitt and left in the minivan.

Highlights from the drive back:

Jimmy: Dad, we've got this really –

Andy: Wahhhhhh!

Jimmy: Quiet! It's this movie tha –

Andy: Wahhhhhh!

Jimmy: Andy, stop it!

Karen: What's stinky, Jack?

Me: Not me.

Jimmy: I didn't.

Karen, smelling Andy: It's not the baby. Let's check our shoes.

11.6 House

Ryan

When we blow a fuse in the house, I go to the basement to flip the switch. Since it's a big and complicated panel, I don't know which switch goes to which room, and I try all of them. I can tell which switch goes to the room Ryan is in, because when I flip it, I hear him through his vents: "Hey!"

Ryan: How come we don't have a garage?

Me: Because we've got a yard instead, and we can wrestle there.

Ryan: We could wrestle on the side of the house.

Me: That's only like two feet of grass. We don't want to go rolling into the street.

Ryan: Maybe you would.

Jimmy

Jimmy: Mommy, I'm going to get married in 60 years, and I can't wait until you and Dad get kicked out of the house. But I'd still let you come every day and visit.

Jimmy: Wouldn't it be something if our house was elephant proof? I mean, if it was made out of metal, and if an elephant stepped on it, he wouldn't break it.

Karen

Karen wants to build out the attic floor – double dorm it. This translates into flattening out our traditional roof so that someone taller than Andy can stand against a sidewall. We won't do anything fancy, because we're mostly interested in sturdiness. So, our upstairs decor will have that 1950s Soviet look.

Jack

We have a basement key that's similar to our front door key, and I'm often mixing them up.

Me to the wrong key: Oh, just work. Come on, what's it to you?

Family

We have a slipcover to protect the couch, and we have a blanket over the slipcover to protect the slipcover.

Our house is free of plants, and in this way, we're furthering the health of them.

Circle

Chris is a graphics designer who lives downstairs from us. Two notes:

Chris went to school with that guy in Singapore who got caned.

Chris (a graphic designer, we recall) told me about the elaborate work cookie photographers go through. They'll blow dry a cookie to get the chips glazing, and they'll surgically remove an inferior chip, then replace it with another. I know modeling is tough when I see chocolate chips struggling.

11.7 Thanksgiving

Tuesday before

I went to the all-natural food store, and they're selling a turkey loaf made out of tofu.

Wednesday before

We drove down to St. Louis. I had a rotten cold, so I didn't pay much attention to anyone but me – that's why this will be a short story.

Thanksgiving

Mom showed us her vacation pictures from her trip to the Everglades. ...

Photo 1

Mom: Here's this alligator. He floated up to the side of our boat and begged for food, the old bum.

Photo 2

Mom: Here's our guide – his name was Schnitzhauser. That's German.

Doug and Peggy had the Thanksgiving dinner at their house. Mom, Doug, Madeline and Peggy were four cooks in one kitchen, so the poor turkey was really outnumbered.

Brother Al and I played tennis nearby.

Al: For a terrible player you're OK.

I forgot to bring clothes, so I went upstairs and got some of Doug's. I didn't hesitate, because borrowing clothes is one of the reasons I have brothers.

They live in Webster Groves, which is a near-in St. Louis suburb. Ten years ago, the huge old trees there secured the right to vote and are slowly moving the people out.

Jimmy found a pinecone.

Jimmy: I'm going to put peanut butter on it, then I'm going to twist it into a tray of birdseed, and nobody's going to eat it 'cause it's a special gift for the birds, and I bet they'll like it.

Jimmy: Uncle Doug, you can't have a cigar.

Doug: Why not?

Jimmy: OK, just don't smoke it.

Friday after

On this day, I give thanks for not being obsessed with shopping.

I went to a hockey game with Doug, Sam and Neil. Two quick notes: Watching grown athletes beat each other up was a lot of fun. There was this one fight, and our guy got the worse of it. So, our coach sent in this big fellow, and he skated right over to the opposing player and just pounded him.

On Sunday, we thanked everyone and drove home.

11.8 VCR

When I set the VCR to record something later, it flashes this giant warning to “Turn VCR off for timer recording.” Why can’t the VCR turn itself off? For gosh sake, our iron can do that.

I had the VCR open to fix a tape that got stuck in there.
Jimmy: That’s so cool! I’ll shrink myself down, then I’ll go exploring for you, and I’ll see if it’s broken or not. I’ll look for something that’s stuck in the VCR, something like a piece of film, I’ll get it, and I’ll bring it out.
Me: How would we shrink you down?
Jimmy: With duh-uh! A shrink machine. I’m not going to tell you any more.

We had a videotape that wouldn’t go without a fight. It took two VCRs down with it.

The older boys were clamoring to go out, so I agreed we could all go to the video store and each rent one movie. Andy got to come along, and this excited him very much. I pulled the baby’s coat out and he did a happy tiny dance in one spot. Then he tried to put the coat on himself. He sort of piled it on top of his head.

As we walked along, the two older boys ran in front of us and did in-the-air kicks. Andy was content to sit in the stroller and pull on one of his hood drawstrings. At the store, Andy turned rambunctious. He pulled lots of empty video boxes off the shelves.

Ryan, showing me an oversized candy bar: Dad, can I have this?
Me: No.
Ryan, showing me another: How about this one?
Me: No.
Ryan: Is there any candy you’d like? I’ll split it with you.

They didn’t have the movie Jimmy wanted.
Jimmy, angry: This video store is out of the question.

Me: Is there anything else we need?
Ryan: Hang on – I still have to go annoy Jim.

Since it was a Friday night, all the workers were basically 19 years old. The assistant manager (I could tell by the uniform) was sitting with friends, eating roast beef sandwiches and watching a movie they selected. The company must approve of this behavior, because otherwise the teens wouldn’t have done it.

Two quick notes:
~ When we pay \$40 for a VCR, I expect it to last for years.

~ The newer VCRs rewind slower than the older ones.

11.9 Trip to Orlando

Karen, Ryan, Jimmy and I flew down to Orlando, and Andy stayed with Grandma Martha and Grandpa Fritz at our house.

Thursday

We got on the plane, and there were three seats on each side. Karen wisely took the D seat – on the aisle, across from us three. Ryan got seat A by the window, Jimmy got C on the aisle, and you can guess who got B.

We landed in Orlando. Our rent-a-car cost too much (about \$50 per day, \$22 of that insurance), so the counter lady felt sorry for me and gave us a free upgrade. We hopped in our SUV – necessary for Orlando's snow and rough terrain – and drove down to the motel.

Since this was an off time, our room was only \$39 a night – less than the rent-a-car. Take my serious advice: Go to Orlando when it's not a popular vacation time.

Friday: Mother Goose Park

Karen carried all kinds of items in her backpack, including raincoats, jackets, juice boxes and napkins. I carried 40 lbs. of Jimmy, and Ryan carried a load of comments.

Ryan: Why do these theme parks only show characters from their cartoons?

Me: What was scary about the haunted cottage?

Jimmy: I saw Abraham Lincoln there.

Ryan and Jimmy discussed the Jack & Jill Mountain rafting ride.

Ryan: You were totally scared. I saw the expression on your face.

Jimmy: I was just going wow.

Ryan: You were scared out of your wits.

Jimmy: No I wasn't. Everyone was screaming.

Ryan: When we were going to the big waterfall you said, "I'm scared, Dad," and you held his hand literally.

Jimmy: No way! You were seeing a kid who looked like me.

Because it wasn't crowded, we all went on the London Bridge roller coaster three times non-stop.

Jimmy: Man, that was so cool.

Ryan: You guys go on ahead – I’ll just keep riding.

This fellow was in the park, and he had a tattoo of a woman’s face on his chest. I checked if it matched his wife’s face, and luckily for him, it did.

I had only one request: Going to Old King Cole’s Historic Leaders exhibit – with animatronic figures telling war stories, etc. The kids went with me, but it wasn’t their favorite attraction.

Ryan, afterward: What was that? I mean, what?

We were getting some food at the Hot Cross Buns stand, and this eight-year-old kid was enjoying his camera. I was just standing there, and the kid took a snapshot of me. The kid’s father yelled at him.

Kid’s Dad: Hey! Don’t waste pictures.

It was time to head to our motel...located on the East Irlo Bronson Memorial Highway – catchy name. It has all kinds of kid/family attractions.

Ryan, looking out the car window: Let’s play putt-putt golf.

Me: No, it’s night time and we’re going to rest.

Ryan: OK, but at least let’s play putt-putt golf.

Me: That’s not resting. We’ve had a full day and we’re going to the motel.

Ryan: OK. Dad, there’s a place with play tubes right next to our motel.

Me: You keep agreeing with me, then you say something else.

Ryan: Thanks! Jim, you wanna play in the tubes?

Orlandoh!

Dimensions

The city of Orlando is like a connect-the-dots picture: A dot is a theme park, airport or cluster of hotels. These dots are 5-10 miles from each other, and the connecting lines are four-lane asphalt roads with 45 mph speed limits. What’s in between the dots? Nobody stops to learn. Swamp creatures, maybe.

Memory: On a previous trip to Orlando, Karen and I wanted to see the spaceships at Cape – is it Kennedy or Canaveral now? Anyway, it’s on the east coast, and it’s about 60 miles from Orlando. Before leaving Karen tanked up on coffee, and this was a bad idea. Florida’s “going east to the Atlantic” highway has almost no rest stops, and if you pull over and “go” out in a field, you might get bit in the rear by an alligator. I was driving.

Karen: I have *got* to use the bathroom!

To make matters worse, other coffee-bladdered drivers were using every possible pull-off-to-the-side spot. But we made it to a decent place,

everything was resolved, and now I know where the astronauts got part of their training.

Orlando has...

- ~ so many factory reject stores, I worry about the output from those factories.
- ~ humidity. I had to run the wipers low the entire time. (Not kidding.)
- ~ nice names for streets, like Universal Blvd.
- ~ lots of religious radio stations.
- ~ drivers who hang their left arms out of their cars.
- ~ thousands of white rental cars. So many white SUVs looked like mine, I had to identify ours by the license plate number. And even some of those were the same...hmm.
- ~ many elaborate billboards promoting the attractions. With some, the billboards are much better than the real thing...they should just charge to look at those.

Here's the issue with Orlando: Everything is too nice and new there. Having lived in Chicago or St. Louis my whole life, seeing all-new-everywhere gives me the willies.

Food-wise, Orlando has...

- ~ a hotdog stand shaped like a nine foot tall, 30 foot wide hotdog.
- ~ different ethnic cuisines, but too many of the dishes taste essentially the same: "blandly touristy." The Chinese food tastes like Mexican, and the Mexican like Italian.

Saturday: Danomotion Studio

This theme park put us inside the makings of movies and TV shows. Half the place is a tour of the studio...and the rest is rides. Sure, they asked me to appear in the action drama they were filming, but I had family commitments.

10-part story:

1. The park opened at the top of the hour.
2. Ryan and I stood at the entrance and waited for that time to arrive. (Karen and Jimmy were happily hanging back.)
3. Everyone wanted to get on the Poseidon's Tomb ride, so once the ropes were down, we were all going to run in that direction.
4. The approximately 15 park attendants behind the gates knew this. So, when the gates opened, they formed a chain with their backs to us, and kept us from running in front of them.

5. They walked at a moderate pace to the ride, and we all jostled behind them. (But don't worry – it was nowhere near like a rock concert.)
6. Ryan and I stayed in front.
7. Being the first one on the ride would be an achievement – something to brag about later.
8. Ryan maneuvered...and ultimately...he was A-Number-1 on the ride!
9. Me: Ryan, you really did it!
10. Jimmy, later: Ryan, that's 3,000 times cool.

For lunch, we selected this virtual reality racetrack restaurant. We sat at tables shaped like racecars and watched a big movie screen that took us on a fast tour of the world – very cool. The kids got meals served in plastic racing helmets that they could keep. But the kids couldn't wear the helmets while they contained food, and we had some close calls.

Saturday night: Downtown

They've taken a main street and turned it into a walking mall. There's an old fire engine on the street, western style bar, and stores with knick-knacks. At one place we saw a stuffed buffalo.
Jimmy: He is definitely dead.

Karen declined to go into the downtown haunted house we went to some years previous, because back then it scared the baggies out of her. Here's the story of that special house tour. ...

As required, seven of us created a mini conga line – no dancing, though – and we walked through these dreary rooms. I was the leader. A rotten creature (man in a costume) would jump out, attack us, and de-conga us – everyone was sent shrieking. At one point I couldn't see what path to take next.

Me to the creature: Where should we go now?

Creature, speaking very nicely: Oh, just go through here and walk down the hall.

Me: Thank you.

Sunday: Mother Goose Park again.

That's exactly where we went.

In the evening, we took Ryan to the airport, because he had to get back early and attend school. It's remarkable that Ryan has been flying by himself for over

half his life – since he was 4 1/2. He’s even getting the haggard look of a weary traveler.

Monday: Ocean-Antics Park

Ocean-Antics Park is pleasant and quiet. A sea lion told me, “We like it here. The other parks are too noisy.”

We bought fish bait and tossed it to the seals. I took a piece, reached back to throw it, and a seagull swooped in and snatched it right out of my hand. I ran after the gull and wrestled it back.

Later, we went into this giant fish tank display. We walked under a long glass tunnel that has umpteen gallons of water and all kinds of exotic sea life around us.

Jimmy, walking through: I must look like a really weird fish to them.

Tuesday

We returned home, thanked Martha and Fritz, and hugged baby Andy.

Karen: Andy, you’ll go to those big parks in a few years.

Baby gave his Mom a full-faced smile.

11.10 Restaurant

Ryan

Memory of Ryan at age seven: We'd go to Stackers fast food, and I'd set up a course for him in the big climbing tubes. Then I'd time him as he ran through.

Ryan: I'd go faster there weren't so many tubes.

Ryan to the fast-food server: And for a prize I want #4.

Server, blandly: We don't have #4s. All we have are #5s.

Ryan: Eh, OK.

I had no idea what they were talking about.

Ryan ordered at Stackers.

Server: What would you like?

Ryan: I'll have a chicken sandwich.

Then another server walking behind our server happened to say: That I don't know.

Ryan: What do you mean?

Server: What?

Me: No Ryan – the lady behind this lady said something.

Ryan: Huh?

When Ryan was four, he pointed at the "No public restrooms" sign.

Ryan: Oh, man!

Me: What?

Ryan: I don't know. I can't read.

We saw a taco place, and Ryan and I were hungry.

Me: Here's nine bucks. Get yourself something, and I'll take two tacos and a diet soda.

Back he came with just one taco – for himself.

Me: Where are my tacos?

Ryan: I didn't think you wanted any.

Me: Why do you think I gave you all that money?

Ryan: Dad, that guy in there? He was no help at all.

Jimmy

Jimmy: I hate going to restaurants. Don't even think about taking me to a restaurant.

Me: How about going to a fancy place to eat instead?

Jimmy: Maybe.

I put my root beer on a ledge, lifted Jimmy onto my shoulders, and picked up the soda.

Jimmy: That drink's not yours. Put it back.

Me: I got it from where we ate.

Jimmy: No, it belongs to the people in that house.

News promo on TV: Cooks become crooks, tonight at 10.

Jimmy: I hope we don't go to a restaurant with those cooks.

Jimmy and I went to the Loop together, and for the first time he went into the donut shop and ordered food all by himself. I watched him from my parked car.

...

Jimmy looked considerably shorter than the others in line, and he was the only one bouncing and waving his money. Jimmy got to the counter, nodded his head vigorously a few times, and got the goods. This being the Loop, nobody gave a second look to a five-year-old performing this transaction.

Jimmy: I got your change. Here's the money.

Me: That's terrific. Did it go nice?

Jimmy: Yep.

Me: Were you nervous?

Jimmy: No. Please eat your donut.

Karen

It was Sunday, about 11:00 am, and Karen was working at the office.

Ryan: Hey, we can take Nan out to lunch. And Jimmy, Andy and I will pay, 'cause we've got money.

Karen loved the invitation, so the wheels were set in motion. Everyone had a responsibility:

~ Jimmy's job was to call his Mom and let her know the status.

~ Ryan's job was to get money.

~ Andy was our mascot.

Money-wise, Ryan came up with \$1.12 and some video game tokens. That was close enough, so we drove down, picked up Karen, and had a fun outing together.

Jack

In Chicago, I've learned to understand what fast food counter people say to me.

Me: I'll have a turkey sandwich.

Server: Ajj nreslenk?

Me: Um, wheat bread is fine.

Attendant: Eevlie clew?

Me: Sure, lotsa pickles.

Attendant: Dolost weq.

Me: I agree – Grover Cleveland was the right president for his time.

I hadn't been to this Mediterranean fast food place in a long time, and I didn't remember what I wanted.

Me: I'll have a large order of beans and three pitas, and no oil on the beans.
Server, looking at me suspiciously: Oil on beans? We don't do that. What kind of beans do you want?
Me: Um, refried, kind of. Those refried...brown...beans.
Server, growing sour: Are you sure you don't want humus? We put oil on humus. Look at that picture up there – that's humus. It's white.
Me, realizing I also like humus: Hmm. How about one order of humus and one of the brown kind of beans.
Server, becoming more exasperated: One large humus, one bean.
Me: Can you make them small?
Attendant: Small?
Me: Yes. Two larges would be a lot. And no oil on the humus, of course.
Server: Yes. I have that.
Me: And three pitas.
Server: Yes. I have that.
Me, suddenly remembering: Oh – you folks put cheese on the beans. That's what it is. I'm sorry – I don't want cheese on the beans.
Server: You don't want cheese on the beans.
Me: Right. That's what I was thinking when I originally talked about the oil. ...

I thanked her and walked away so she could fill the order. A few minutes later, I thought of something.

Me: Did I say carryout?
Server: You want this carryout?
Me: Yes, thank you.

Server, pointing at a tray and napkin: I'm already getting it for you for here.
Me: I'm sorry, but I'm sure another customer can use that.

She made big snapping sounds getting the paper bag, and I fear we didn't depart as friends.

I went early to a Chinese restaurant and waited for someone. They had the modern Chinese songs going over their intercom, and I quietly sang along: "Wa sah mee, seeh chow lay doh."

Bagel story

I went into a bagel place this morning, and my glasses fogged over – they always do when it's winter and I go from outside to inside. This was problematic, because I like a crispy bagel, and that means I need to see how the bagel looks after it comes out of the modern conveyor belt toaster and before it goes into the bag.

Usually the bagel has to go through twice, I'm happy to take whatever time is necessary to have a good crunch to my bagel, but I'm not up to the task if my glasses are fogged. Am I going on about this?

Anyway, the server put the bagel through once and showed it to me.

Server: You want this toasted again?

Me, unable to see clearly: Yes.

As it went through the second time, I smelled something burning. Uh oh. The server handed me a bag with a burnt bagel inside. Because of pride, I acted like this was exactly what I wanted and paid. Then I went to the coffee preparation counter and discreetly tossed the inedible bread.

Now, I still needed a bagel! But I sure wasn't going to humiliate myself before the server.

Luckily, fate played into my hands, because the server went to the back. (Servers go to the back a lot.) Server 2 was at the register, so I impatiently ordered a bagel from her, asked her to toast it (once), and I hoped Server 1 wouldn't come out and confront me. Tension mounted as I stood there.

But whew – I got my bagel in time, paid and escaped. I looked at the bagel, and it was barely toasted. I figured!

Family

Ryan: There's Al's Snack Shop.

Jimmy: Who's Al Shock?

The two younger boys and I went to Brrgrs restaurant.

Andy sat in the high chair they have and drank his ba-ba.

Jimmy ate his hamburger straight through the middle.

Me: Why don't you eat the corners of it?

Jimmy: A circle doesn't have corners.

Rain story

On Sunday, the three boys and I walked to a fast-food place. We were leaving and...it was raining hard. What to do? It's forbidden to walk a baby in a downpour. Three people would have performed a citizen's arrest on me.

...

So, we ran under trees and awnings to the supermarket close by.

I bought two umbrellas – \$7.79 each – and back we walked. I wrapped the baby in my t-shirt so he wouldn't get the rain/splash on him, so I was shirtless. If I didn't have such a rock-hard physique, it would have been embarrassing.

Talk

A restaurant is about to start nearby. The hand-made sign on the door read, "We have applied for our liquor license and will open soon." Now, do they think we're a bunch of hopeless alcoholics in this neighborhood? Open up the place and make me stay sober through a meal.

11.11 Dad profile

My father lived from near 1935 until 1997, and he's the greatest man I've ever known. Let's get right to it, because there's a lot to cover.

Dad...

- ~ worked for the world's largest computer company 36 years – his entire career.
- ~ was always there for us. Dad's devotion to his family was a given.
- ~ did nothing to increase his social standing, and he was proud of that.

Dad's quotes

"I only vote to cancel out my wife's votes."

"We bought the car from a little old lady who only used it to asphyxiate her husband."

"He doesn't have a pot to pee in or a window to throw it out of."

"Here's some money. I want you to go spend this – don't save it."

"The only problem with you kids is that nobody will let me sell you."

The more serious ones

"The more emotional you are the less rational you are."

"Always make your boss look good."

"If it's right then accept. Everything else will fall into place."

"He has the curse of disposable income – he spends too much."

"I have a job, and you have a job. Your job is to get good grades."

1960s

Work

Dad was a Systems Engineer. That means he determined how the computer would work in each client site, and he made sure everything really did work.

The online police record system

In the early 1960s, my 28-year-old father led in the development of a new weapon – one that has defeated countless criminals, and brought has brought a reprieve to thousands of police officers and their families.

First, some background. Before 1962, when a suspicious man was pulled over and his driver's license number was called in, the officer waited a long time – in a bad part of town – for that man's paper record to be located. Was he a wanted felon?

Dad and his coworkers invented the first-of-its-kind online criminal record retrieval system. With this solution, records officers could dial into a computer and quickly obtain the necessary information about drivers. This cut the response time to mere seconds, and increased the accuracy

tremendously. If knowledge is power, Dad's team gave every cop a howitzer.

The police department got this because no one understood telecommunications like Dad did. In fact, the police department received an inquiry from the telephone company, wondering about the weird noises on the phone line – all those beeeeps and brrrrrrs. (People were only supposed to talk on phones.)

But the local cops understood as much as they needed to. Dad became a fast friend of the police department, and sometime later, Dad got the one perk he wanted: Access to the visiting hockey Bruins locker room, so his son Doug could get Bobby Orr's autograph.

Just so it's clear, the success at the police department (and another one coming up) was the result of team effort – not one person's work alone. This group made great strides in online data communications.

Technology over money

At this time, many technical experts moved into management, but Dad turned that down.

Dad, later: They said I'd make more money, but hell – I didn't need any more money.

Dad was living from check to check, just like everyone else. It was just that wealth didn't interest him, and making technological advances did.

This is a good time to say: One of the best things Dad taught me was to avoid greed. He demonstrated the true freedom in not pursuing money, and the true happiness in trying to make life better for everyone.

But Dad never had that dreamy "I'm helping people" look. His day-to-day expressions showed that he was 1) pursuing knowledge and understanding, and 2) always ready to hear a good joke.

Life

Sam: Dad, Jack licked the handrail.

Dad: I don't think that'll make other people sick.

Here comes a deep paragraph:

Let's say a man has a gift for music. He's a great performer, but only his friends and family know this – he'd never consider taking it further. He teaches his four sons music from day one. Thanks to him, the sons play their instruments well and goad each other into improving. As a result, there's

music all around the house. Over the years, the mother lets her natural talent for music blossom, and she becomes a strong musical influence on the sons. But first credit goes to the father. Because of him, this can rightfully be called a great musical family. All this is comparable to what my Dad did, except music wasn't his talent. He did all the above with humor.

Another great gift Dad gave us kids was decision-making power. He was never interested in deciding for us – we needed to learn what to do. But he was very ready to yell at us if we made the wrong choices.

OK: It's time to hold on tight, because Dad was very politically incorrect. For example, Dad watched Lee Harvey Oswald get killed on TV.
Dad: This is better than a western.

Dad...

- ~ liked to make bets with people – but only for a nickel.
- ~ hated instant coffee.
- ~ read dozens of paperback spy novels.
- ~ was not handy around the house.
- ~ actually followed the plots in James Bond films.
- ~ encouraged us to watch The Three Stooges, because they were irreverent.

1970s

Work

Online credit card authorizations

Dad had another major work accomplishment – one that resulted in the ongoing employment of over 1,000 professionals in metro St. Louis.

Today, we each can have one credit card for everything. But in the early 1970s, a consumer needed a wallet full of cards – one for each department store chain, line of gas stations, and so forth. Because a person's credit standing couldn't be quickly determined (like over phone lines), he or she had to establish credit in stores all over the city. This was a big pain for all.

To make a long story short, Dad and the team established a state-of-the-art system for quick credit authorization over phone lines. This time, the key to success was getting the fickle mainframe computer to operate continually. It was a very difficult task, but one he and the group accomplished.

This system was so dramatically different...

1) it contributed significantly to the creation of a credit card that's now world-famous.

2) St. Louis became an early processor of online credit card transactions. That operation has grown, and now, this center is one of metro St. Louis' largest employers. Well over 1,000 professionals process hundreds of millions of transactions worldwide.

Dad was a very minor participant in the development of a word processing program – and there weren't many of those. As a test, they typed up the *Holy Bible New Testament*.

Dad: We can't figure out how to stop it from hyphenating "Jesus."

Life

Dad followed his own set of rules. For example, when his father was in the hospital and dying from emphysema, Dad brought his dad a carton of cigarettes. Why?

Dad: Aw, he was gonna go anyway, and that's what he wanted.

Dad was highly appreciative of service people – the food server, bait shop clerk, and mechanic – and he was glad to be friends with many of them. One day, his mechanic friend was robbed, tied up and locked in the service station restroom – but thank goodness, he wasn't hurt. When Dad heard the news, he couldn't get over it for days.

Dad wrote sarcastic letters to the big St. Louis newspaper, and they were never printed. For example: In the mid '70s this major league pitcher wanted to break strict team rules and grow his hair long. Dad wrote in that the pitcher could also wear a clown suit – that would really distract the batters. His letter was returned, "so you can circulate it amongst others."

In one sentence, Dad would cut down any person as necessary. Dad made instant, accurate, and barefaced assessments like:

"He's a jerk."

"He's an animal."

"She's pulling a con job on herself."

By the late '70s, Dad had refined this to calling certain people Trash, Freak or Cretin. Most of them were Al's friends.

Dad was a bad outdoor chef. One time he didn't have lighter fluid, so he poured a lot of gasoline on the charcoal. He threw down the match, and it all went "kafloom!" like a mushroom cloud.

We were watching a documentary on how they taped this popular situation comedy.

Producer: We throw candy to the audience ahead of time – it gets them excited.

Dad: Oh my God.

Cars

In 1970, Dad went to buy a new car. After he had arranged everything, we all piled into our old car to pick up the new one – we were excited. Dad went into the dealership, and the salesman gave him the keys to his new car.

Salesman: By the way – we’re not gonna be able to give you as much money on your trade-in.

Dad: What?

Dealer: Your old car out there – my boss says we can’t pay that much for it.

They were changing the deal at the last minute, so Dad threw the new car keys on the counter.

Dad: Thanks for wasting my time, jerk.

He walked out, got in the old car and drove away..

I was driving with Dad, and another car cut in front of him.

Me: Why didn’t you honk at that guy?

Dad: I didn’t want to wake him.

Dad’s relationship with cars was complex and illogical. For example, he paid \$500 to get his transmission fixed, then a few months later he sold the car for \$400.

Dad: Well, I had to fix the transmission or nobody would have bought the car.

1980s

Work

Dad took us on a Saturday tour of his office.

Dad: They have this keycard system for security. Because we aren’t on my assigned floor, on Monday the guard will call me and ask why I was there. I’ll tell him I was breaking into the vending machines.

Life

Mom and Dad were in Chicago, and we ate at a tourist restaurant that’s famous for insulting their patrons – it’s a fun thing they do. Dad, not a grand physical specimen, started getting verbally abused by the server.

Server: Hey Pops! They let you out of the home, huh? Waddaya want, Gramps?

Dad: Another waiter.

Every decade of his life, Dad loved fishing, so he often hooked up with other fishermen.

Dad, talking about a man he was standing ear: That fellow kept talking about “the catfish...ohh, the catfish.” He sounded like a man who’d just gotten religion.

Here's one of my Dad's favorite jokes:

This American senator went into a tribal village and gave a speech.

Senator: We're going to build many new roads for you.

Crowd: Um gala gala!

Senator: And we'll bring in pipes for a new water supply.

Crowd: Um gala gala!

Later, the politician met with the tribe leader.

Politician: I think they really liked the speech.

Leader: Yes, now let's take a tour. Just remember not to step in the um gala gala.

1990s

Life

We were in a parking garage, and Karen was pushing baby Ryan in the stroller. This car came quickly around the corner and braked right in front of Karen and Ryan. Everyone was shocked, and the driver was sitting there looking at us.

Mom to the driver: You idiot!

Dad: C'mon, he knows he's an idiot.

Going person by person, Dad...

~ said Mom was the most beautiful woman he'd ever met, and he was completely devoted to her.

~ engaged in high-intellect conversations with Al. This was Dad's way of saying he loved someone.

~ spoke about how proud he was of Sam, happy that he was making solid accomplishments.

~ went fishing with Doug, and I can never understand – much less explain – those deep bonds between fishermen.

~ watched TV with me – almost every night as I grew up. Learning from him was like adding a paragraph to a book, once a day for 14 years.

~ received hugs from daughters-in-law Karen and Peggy. Dad always said, "OK, OK."

~ enjoyed being a grandfather. When Ryan was one, Grandma, Grandpa and Ryan rode a train to Chicago, and Ryan whined the whole six hours.

Grandpa, afterwards: Ryan is the rottenest kid in the whole world!

I knew Ryan had stolen his Grandpa's heart.

~ gave baby Jimmy lots of ice cream.

~ was told about the impending arrival of a new grandchild (Eva, born after Dad passed on) and Dad exclaimed, "OK!" It was his trademark approval.

~ was father to his dog Drew.

Work

One more story: Dad's employer had a mandatory vacation policy, but Dad didn't relate to it. To follow the rules, Dad would occasionally sign

himself as gone, then walk back to his desk and work. A 10-year span of strokes wore my father down, and at 63, he caught pneumonia. On November 20, 1997, Dad finally took his time off from the company.

12. December

12.1 Timeline

Jimmy: Is there anything new, now since we're in the future?

Me: Hm. This year, Ryan got better at checkers, and you learned to read. And Andy started to talk.

Jimmy: I don't think Mom learned anything.

We got hit with snow, and it caught me by surprise. I watch the weather forecast, but I never pay attention. I'm too distracted by the meteorologist's orange hair weave.

I was at the post office buying stamps for holiday cards. They had big sign listing everything I'm not allowed to send. Absolutely, I will never mail gasoline.

12.2 Andy at 17 months

I put Andy's snow boots onto the wrong feet, but I should be forgiven. They aren't shaped much left or right.

We have a full-length mirror, and Andy looked at himself and smiled. Then he walked around behind it to find that baby who was grinning at him.

12.3 Circle update

The Hanukkah party

The whole family went to a nice Hanukkah party given by friends Chaim and Sarah Popkin. They live in a high-rise condo on Lake Shore Drive – lotsa amenities, including a tennis court on the second floor. This is impressive, but if the ball went out, I wouldn't run after it.

Chaim and I worked together some years ago. We were building a potential customer list at this time, and it was Chaim's job to call company after company and learn who the contact was. He would take this eight-inch stack of cards, make hundreds of phone calls, and whittle it down. Every time he got close to the bottom – feeling some real accomplishment – I'd bring this new big stack. Finally, he got completely exasperated.

Chaim: Why don't you throw those cards over the monkey cage at the zoo and let them make the calls.

(Oh, he was joking.)

Chaim and Sarah met because she was coordinator for this "young adults meeting each other" group, and Chaim was a young adult who met her. I'm tempted to believe Sarah chose this job partly so she could have her pick of men.

The party was fun! A few days later, we reflected on it.

Me: Remember when you spun the ladle at the party?

Jimmy: Ladle?

Me: No, sorry. The dreidel.

Ryan: I wish we lived in a building again. We don't even have a doorman.

12.4 Christmas stories

Jimmy: Does Santa bring Christmas presents to the forest animals?

We set up the artificial tree. Our tree comes in three parts, so – keeping with tradition – Ryan carried the lower half, Jimmy and I toted up the middle part had the middle, and Andy carried the little top part. Karen videotaped.

Santa e-mailed Jimmy a letter. Santa said Jimmy could become an elf when he's older. Jimmy wrote Santa back and said he'll be too big to be an elf.

The Christmas windows

We went to see the Christmas windows at a famous Loop department store. They show a children's story that progresses in each window, and it's done with those little animatronic stringless puppets.

Ryan felt too old to be seen partaking in Christmas festivities, so he put on two pairs of pants, three shirts, a sweater, jacket, ski mask and sunglasses.

Ryan: Nobody will recognize me. My name's Ninja.

On the drive down to the Loop:

Jimmy: How can Santa's elves make pets?

Karen: They don't make them. They get them, and Santa gives them to little children.

Jimmy: I want a warthog.

Ryan: Are you crazy?

Jimmy: I'd like him.

Ryan: He'd wrestle you to the ground and you wouldn't laugh, believe me.

Jimmy: I hope Santa doesn't bring me any rocks and coal.

We made it into the Loop.

Me: There's the giant Christmas tree.

Ryan: That's not it.

Me: Yes, that's it. There can be no other.

Ryan: Can I climb it?

Jimmy: Christmas is all about Jesus' birth. That sounds like burp.

We drove into the huge parking garage.

Parking garage electronic voice: Please take the ticket.

Me: Thank you.

Me: Ryan, can you write down where we parked?

Ryan: I'll remember – we're right by a cement pole.

The kids walked in front of the succession of store windows and saw the moving statuettes in there. The glass was all smeared up along the bottom part, and you can guess why.

Me: Jimmy, I thought that dragon was gonna come out and bite you.

Jimmy: Dragons don't bite – they toast.

Seeing the Christmas windows is an experience all generations in the family can enjoy together. Furthermore, the oldest generation can bring back their parents in memory. "Sixty years ago, my mother and father stood right here while I looked in the windows."

Me: What do you think of these store windows?

Ryan: Eh, yeah. Lotta kids here.

Ryan said it like he was 50.

Andy sat in the stroller and paid no attention to the windows.

Ryan: Can I pleeeeeeze go ice-skating?

Me: We've gotta leave.

Ryan: I'll be real quick.

Me: We'd have to rent skates – it's too much work.

Ryan: I'll skate in my socks.

We got back in the minivan.

Karen: OK, we're off to lunch.

Me: Oh, Karen – you've gotta get your oil changed.

Ryan: We're going to the oil change place for lunch?

Homemade Christmas play

Jimmy created a home stage production of *The Night Before Christmas*..

Me: Who's gonna play what parts?

Jimmy: Ryan's gonna play Santa, and my mom's gonna play the Mama. Andy will be the Abominable Snowman [?]. Dad, you're the Dad. I'm gonna be a director. If anybody makes any mistakes we just say, "cut." And, I've got the lines written in my head.

Ryan agreed to play Santa, as long as this Santa could continue to work on his model spaceship. Jimmy liked the idea.

Jimmy was a frantic director. He ran around the room, bouncing into chairs and couches as he called out high-spirited direction.

Jimmy: Stop it everybody!

He needed a drink and snack because it was all wearing him out.

As the Mama, Karen was required to sit on the couch and observe.

Jimmy: Mom, settle your head for a nap.

The Abominable Snowman needed a nap worse, and he was crying. He laid down near Mama and settled down.

After his snack, Jimmy wanted to watch TV, so that ended rehearsals.

Ryan: Just when I was getting into it.

Christmas Eve

Jimmy: I think Santa comes about 4:30 o'clock.

I was setting up the video camera to record our Christmas Eve preparations, and I thought I was fast-forwarding through the family action already on the tape. But in fact, I was reversing it. Our family looks no different going forward or backward.

Naturally, we had to prepare for the big visit. Jimmy, Andy and I put out cookies and milk plus nine little carrots. We also cleaned the living room so it looked nice for Santa. This was Karen's idea.

Jimmy: Mom, does Santa go to Mars?

Karen: I don't think so. I think he's only on earth.

Jimmy: Is there a Santa on Mars?

Karen: I don't know.

Jimmy: What about north Mars?

Christmas Day

On Christmas morning I was asleep, but I half-remember these small hands taking my blanket. The little guys were freezing me out of bed so I'd get up and walk over to the tree...because something happened there. We had presents!

Me: Did you hear anything?

Jimmy: I thought I heard scratching on the roof.

Ryan, feeling the outside wrapping of one gift: Good, CDs – thanks. Wait. Are these are educational?

I buy people gifts that benefit me. For example, I got Marco an answering machine, because he never had one.

Jimmy got a pizza oven.

Jimmy: I think the Santa Claus I saw at that party is the real Santa, because he's the one I told about the pizza oven.

Andy got a lot of stuffed animals. I support this, because I'm always stepping on his things.

Andy also got this little push toy that goes pop pop pop – it's like a rolling tiny popcorn machine. Jimmy thinks it's loud and annoying, but we didn't want to hear his complaints..

Jimmy, quietly to himself: I wish Santa would've given that thing to another kid.

I bought Karen a universal remote control that – it turns out – doesn't work worth a darn. If we buy enough of these bad ones and put them in the drawer, maybe they'll confer with each other and learn how to work.

For the gift to me, I put a pair of dress shoes on our credit card and declared them my present. The style in footwear today (and I'm the one to consult) is to have these big, boxy orthopedic shoes like great-grandmother Mutte used to wear. Mutte was 40 years ahead of her time.

Brother-in-law Neil and friend Dorothy P. Woods came over, and we had a nice Christmas celebration. Karen made a turkey breast, and she used your oyster stuffing recipe – my favorite. We ate so much that afterwards Karen and I fell asleep, and I understand that our guests had a fine 90 minute conversation.

There were plenty of desserts and candy for us. Did you know there's been a breakthrough in the world of sampler boxed chocolates? They now print a diagram on the top of the inside box stating what's in each mystery chocolate. Now I can't give my sons this secret: The square milk chocolate one is always the delicious caramel. But truthfully, I never would have told the boys this.

The next day

The kids made a pizza in that new toy oven, and they saved the first slice for me.

Ryan: But Jim took a bite of it.

12.5 Chicago profile: Food

Let's talk about places where we eat, drink, and etc.

Coffee shops

In the late '80s, there were a number of arty coffee houses with used bookstores inside them. Examples of what some of these places had:

- ~ mismatched chairs
- ~ racy 1950s movie magazines in their restrooms
- ~ an artistic customer using their payphone as his office phone
- ~ a big chalkboard for their menu
- ~ zero regard for fire and building codes
- ~ paintings by local artists up for sale on the walls
- ~ thick porcelain cups
- ~ customers who spent \$2 on two cups of coffee and took up space for three hours

After drinking for three hours at an arty coffee shop, I discovered I had no money for a tip. So, I got this textbook on Pekinese dogs out of my car (that's another story) and wrote inside the front cover, "In lieu of a tip, please accept a copy of this book." I left it on the table. Three months later, I saw the book in an honored spot above their piano – maybe they thought I was the author?

OK, here's the story behind my ownership of that dog book: One time, I went by a trash dumpster and found about 75 copies of this encyclopedia on Pekinese dogs. So, I threw them in my car, and I gave them out as thoughtful gifts.

It's hard to believe anything from the late '80s is gone, but new national coffee shop chains swooped in and drove out most of the stand-alone operations.

Joy at the counter

I've always preferred to sit on a stool at the counter, because I can...

- ~ find a seat faster.
- ~ watch them make the food.
- ~ brings back childhood memories – "I'm eating out, and spinning around on the stool."
- ~ get immediate service, because I'm an easier serve for the wait staff.
- ~ eat alone but with people. It's fine to borrow part of a newspaper.
- ~ look at the row of tiny cereal boxes on the shelf and imagine I'm a giant stomping through a supermarket.
- ~ grab leftovers from the bus trays.

Independent fast food restaurants

I've experienced a lot of average meals before finding great stand-alone operations, and it's been worth the investment. A visitor is cheating himself if he

wants some adventure in Chicago but only eats at national franchises. There are no memorable experiences in a chain. But if he goes to a stand-alone, they could make something unexpectedly good – and unique. Furthermore, the cook might start yelling at someone, and that's a memorable experience.

It's a competitive town for food, and the independent restaurants are evenly priced with the high-end fast-food chains.

A lot of international folks work at and run these stand-alone restaurants. They show as much soccer as possible on 19" color TVs.

As a rule of thumb, the more run-down a place looks the better the food is. They've built a good reputation already, and they don't need to impress people with anything other than their food.

In the Loop, there's a small battle between the immigrant restaurateurs and the trying-to-be-cool 20-esque male corporate customers. I once saw two of these guys sitting at a table in a small and crowded place.

Chef, yelling out to them: Are you done eating?

Guy: Uh, yeah.

Chef: Then you have to go. People are waiting to sit.

Notables

Chicago has a lot of donut shops. If you're a donut and you want to live, avoid Chicago.

In one bad part of town, there's a sign: "World's Best Food – Guaranteed!" Like I'd be stupid enough to demand my money back.

Diners are often called Snack Shops.

Most gyro (lamb and beef ground together and put on a pole) places display this picture of a particular blonde gal hugging a gyro. She could walk around Chicago and be recognized by thousands – as long as she embraced that sandwich.

There's at least one restaurant that...

~ used to be a funeral parlor.

~ is open from 10 pm to 6 am only.

~ takes snapshots of their diners and tape them to the wall. I saw that one gal was there on two different occasions with two different guys.

~ became popular, but couldn't expand next door. So, they put up a second location across the street.

~ spells their name slightly different on their awning vs. their front door.

~ sells a bowl of noodles for \$4.75, so no one needs to worry if they're making a profit.

~ doesn't have a liquor license, and they promote that customers can BYOB.

Mexican

There's a Mexican restaurant that...

~ has a big middle-of-the-night-bars-just-closed crowd. They're #1 at 3:00 am.

~ semi-competes with other places for "world's largest burrito" status. No matter what, eating a huge burrito is a memorable experience.

~ operates 24 hours – with sit-down service and a wait staff. Get enchiladas for breakfast.

~ has food so hot, I drank all my water plus some at another family's table.

Restaurant story

Life can move forward in Chicago restaurants. In Spring 1990, this marvelous lady named Karen and I had...

~ our first lunch at an eatery that's no longer there.

~ our first evening date at a restaurant...and we sat at the counter.

A little while later, I called Karen on a Sunday afternoon to see if she wanted to have a last minute dinner with me. She said yes. This was an indication that something wonderful might happen between us, and I was ecstatic. Karen arrived after taking a tennis lesson, and she was wearing blue jean shorts and a nice t-shirt. OK: Having a dinner date where the lady dresses casually – our relationship was advancing.

The other day, I mentioned that date to the restaurant's owner.

Owner: Was that when we were at the other address?

Me: Yes.

Owner: Now I know. People meet at that address and they get married. And the marriages are wonderful.

She's right about that.

Bars and nightclubs

Bars close at 2:00 am weeknights and 3:00 am weekends.

There's at least one...

~ nightclub that's also a dayclub, because they're going almost all the time. They blast out this continual bass beat – boom, boom, boom – and it knocks me off the sidewalk.

~ bar with a sign up – it says what big-screen movie was filmed there.

~ bar where the second floor apartment burned, so they simply eliminated it – they removed the apartment's floor. I could look up 20 feet, and after 10 feet, there would be wallpaper from the former second floor residence. This bar has been torn down.

~ dance club that promotes their “No New Years Eve Celebration.” They list everything they won’t do, such as count down to midnight and play Auld Lang Syne.

~ bar with a sign in front: “Late Night Kitchen.” It means they serve food into the early hours.

~ club that emulates partying in a particular country.

Year ago, the gay clubs had black window coverings and generally appeared closed. Over the years, they’ve opened up and look great.

Many bars have locally famous stages for locally famous bands. It leads to a question: Who wants to have an apartment above one of these bars?

Stan: Ray, how do you like your new place above the nightclub?

Ray: WHAT?

Stan: That place of yours – do you ever get any sleep?

Ray: Zzzzzzzz.

Alcohol

A peculiarity of Chicago: A typical liquor store is a “combo name” of the street corner it’s on. For example, if the store was at Ashland and Kedzie it might be called Ashked Liquors.

There’s a beer that’s popular in Chicago, but it has a terrible reputation in St. Louis. And it’s vice versa with another brand of beer – much loved in St. Louis, and hated in Chicago.

Bakeries

I saved the best for last. The #1 establishments in North Chicago are independent bakeries. There’s at least one family bakery in every ethnic neighborhood. They deliver a flavor of their homeland. And most give free samples.

12.6 Family photo

Here's how we got our family photo taken. Karen had this all set up in advance, and spent the morning carrying out her plans. We dressed in our "photo clothes," and Karen put a t-shirt over Andy to protect his outfit. Karen asked me to do the same, but I declined.

10:00 am. Getting in the car

Ryan: Jim, sit in the back with me so we can finish our fight.

Ryan: Can I use the cell phone to get a pizza?

Me: You think he'll just drive up to our car, we'll pull over and buy it?

Ryan: Duh yeah, they do that.

10:50 am. Photo shoot

The photo studio is in a western suburbs outdoor shopping mall. It makes me think about that outdoor one in St. Louis mall they enclosed. This one is still open, because Chicagoans enjoy walking through 90 mph -20 degree wind tunnels.

Andy didn't like getting his picture taken – he wailed! And that sent us on a downward non-picturesque spiral.

Karen: We can't get the picture.

Me: Hold it – let me try.

I sat close with Andy and sang songs to him. When he'd calm down, I'd drop away and we'd get a shot.

Karen, later: Your singing worked.

Ryan: That's what made him cry.

11:30. Lunch

I put Andy on my shoulders and we began to walk across the parking lot. Suddenly, the baby took my glasses. We still made it.

We drove up Roosevelt Road. This street has so many fast food places they've run out of names for them, and now they just have big numbers.

Two large guys were on lunch break from this infant clothing store, and they had on baby blue uniform shirts – how adorable! Of course, I didn't stare. "Yeah, I'm wearing a baby outfit. You want your head pounded in?"

On the way back, Andy was crying for his drink, but all we had was cola. So, I poured that into the bottle (sorry – it was an emergency) and he was fine.

Jimmy was getting rambunctious in the car.

Me: Jimmy, Santa knows who's being naughty.

Jimmy: Not right after Christmas.

A few days later, I showed our family portrait to Brother Doug.

Me: We had some choices, but in one photo, Karen's eyes were bugged out, and in another photo, I looked drunk.

Doug: You don't look drunk here?

12.7 Bedtime

Ryan

Me: Ryan, are you tired?

Ryan: Hmph! I wasn't until you just said it.

Ryan sleeps in many different places/ways. He slumps in the chair, hangs off the couch, and curls up under the kitchen table. The problem is: He's almost too big for me to put him in the right spot. We need to hire a huge person who'll tuck Ryan into bed – like those kids on TV shows.

Ryan refuses to have footies in his pajamas, and I can't blame him. He just couldn't make convincing arguments with those on.

Karen: Jimmy, Andy, stop that!

Ryan: I'm going to bed before this gets any worse.

Jimmy

Jimmy: I'm tired. I'm cold. I'm tired and cold.

Jimmy asks me to tell him before-bedtime ghost stories, but they scare him. I don't even have to make up anything compelling. When my mountain climbers found the mannequin, Jimmy was flipping around under the covers.

Jimmy was in bed, and in a joking mood.

Jimmy: Is it ni-night time?

Me: Yes.

Jimmy, turning to sleep: OK.

Jimmy, jumping up: I want breakfast!

Me: Jimmy, it's ni-night time.

Jimmy: Give me a coconut pizza for breakfast!

Andy

Andy needs ba-bas during the night, and the "get him a ba-ba" routine occurs so often I'm numb to it all. From what I remember, Andy screams, I wake up, prepare the formula, prop the ba-ba and baby together, he returns to sleep, and the next morning I wonder if I dreamt everything.

I gave Andy a bottle and he was really going at it – leaning forward, drinking away. But something told me there was a problem. I pulled the bottle away and saw that the nipple opening was closed off. The poor little baby hadn't gotten anything. I was ultra sorry and got him another bottle top. But Andy went right to sleep, because that bad bottle took all his strength.

Andy likes the quilts you created 25 years ago – they get softer with age. Isn't it something: Blankets you made in the mid 1970s bring comfort to a sleepy grandson decades later.

Karen

I was asleep on the couch, and Karen woke me.

Karen: I need my book. It's in the couch.

She started rustling around me.

Karen: Can you get up?

I got up. Karen checked and it wasn't there. I laid back down. About 10 minutes later, my pillow was moving.

Karen, rustling around again: My book has to be here.

It still wasn't.

Jack

Last night I had mega-lots of problems sleeping. Finally, at 3:45 am, I read the encyclopedia entry on John Quincy Adams, and that did the trick.

Talk

I wonder who invented itchy blankets, and what deep personal problems did he have?

Original family

Jimmy: I love Grandpa. He's up in heaven, and he sleeps sometimes.

12.8 New Year's Eve

I believe the three holidays – Thanksgiving, Christmas and New Years – are too close together. I recommend we spread them out, and here's how: We move Labor Day to August 14, Thanksgiving to October 24, keep Christmas where it is, and adopt the Chinese New Year (it's in late Jan/early Feb). Government officials never answer my letters about this.

Here's our New Year's Eve story.

7:15 pm

New Year's Eve started with a good time at Marco's place. We had orange drink and watched some coverage on the news channels. We didn't want any late-night driving, so we were all at home that night.

Andy is paying zero attention to the year change.

9:10 pm

As part of our New Years celebration, we played hide and seek. We do this in the upstairs area. Andy and I search for the two older boys, and to make it challenging we keep the lights off.

I stood downstairs and waited.

Ryan, calling from upstairs: OK Dad, we're ready!

I carried the baby around, and we bumbled through everything. Instinctively, I made "rarhhh," monster sounds. That scared Jimmy and got him to come out. Then Jimmy joined our search team.

Me: Hmm, I wonder where Ryan is.

Jimmy: I saw him hide – he's under the bed.

Ryan, bursting out: Jimmy! Man, I quit!

Afterwards, Ryan and I played 38 games of checkers, and I won 20 to 18. My winning strategy: I showed a videotape of Ryan's favorite teen band in concert, and I put the TV right in front of the boy. Ryan was dancing around, singing into an air microphone, and...not paying attention to his game.

11:55 pm...five minutes away!

Ryan was going to lounge in the other room and watch the kids TV channel announce the New Year, but he got caught up in the spirit and joined us. As the clock ticked down, Ryan was hopping around and excited.

Karen sat up on the couch and watched the TV. Jimmy and Andy were sound asleep. Andy was definitely going to snooze through this New Years, but I woke

up Jimmy. It wasn't easy keeping Jimmy awake – Ryan and I walked him around like we were sobering a drunkard.

Ryan: C'mon, Jim! It's almost New Years!

We stopped in front of the TV.

Karen, Ryan, Me, and Jimmy: Five, four, three, two, one –

Love,

Johnny

13. Afterwords

In a few pages, you're going to get the Who, What, When, Where and Why of this book. First...

13.1 Introduction

Most important: Let's communicate!

Here are three reasons I'm asking you to write me at brackitt@yahoo.com, and/or to access my website:

<http://www.geocities.com/brackitt>

1) You can comment about whatever you wish, set me straight on all the mistakes I've made, and so forth. I'll post up messages on the website – especially the insulting ones. Also, I'm a good online friend.

2) The website is the one place I'm righting any wrongs I created in this book, so please check in or I'll feel like a trash bag. I need to have this “timely source of information about *Mom Letters*,” because the book is the product of a less than average person. It's a certainty that in these paper pages I've...

~ said things that came out the wrong way.

~ delivered outrageously stupid information.

~ forgotten to mention a person I should have.

So, please go to the website and let me make everything right.

3) I'll have fun updates on the website, and you can get great deals on life insurance.

A soul-searching mini-ramble

I don't know why I'm putting you through an “about the book.” (This is what “Afterwords” chapter is, if I haven't told you already.) It's kind of useless, because reading the book explains more about it than me explaining it.

I mean, did Tolstoy offer 15 pages on why he wrote *War and Peace*? I'll bet he did, that jerk. Anyway, I think it's presumptuous of me to answer questions before you ask them, but if you did have a question it'd be worse if I didn't answer it, perhaps because I was intoxicated.

He or she

If I'm speaking of a general someone, I don't like doing the “he/she,” or “he or she,” or “s/he” stuff. Instead, I just randomly chose one or the other: sometimes he, sometimes she.

Terminologies

Section: Roughly three pages of something.

Subsection: Maybe five paragraphs on a topic.

Segment: One block of text. There's a double space above it and below it.

Each segment addresses a different micro-topic. Most of the book is made up of segments.

The “...” at the end of some paragraphs

Normally, the double space between segments means I'm starting something new. But when I'm telling a particularly long story – one that needs multiple blocks of text – I'll put the ellipses at the end like this. ...

Then I can stay on the same topic and air things out a little.

13.2 Who

Self profile

Who is Jack Brackitt?

- ~ I'm a fairly normal weird guy.
- ~ I quickly become annoying.
- ~ Life's beaten me down. I've already cried uncle, so it's easy for me to give it all up in the book.

I'm here to observe

Some years ago it struck me that I'm not on this planet to accomplish much, and what a relief that was. My job is to watch what's going on and report it.

Communicating

Here's my biggest, non-family-oriented, never-ending goal: I want to see what happens when I send a message out to people. What will be the quantity and quality of response?

Getting replies isn't as easy as one would think, and it's worth devoting my lifetime to learning how to increase the response from people.

14-year-old as 35-year-old

A few decades back I concluded that being an adult is boring, and I gave up on it.

Instead, I'm a 14-year-old who's been repeatedly warned that I'm now 35, and I'd better act like it. The father part I like a lot, because now I've got three best friends. I don't follow the typical role for a father, because I'm delighted to race my kids, chase them, act weird – all that.

The husband part is excellent for all the normal reasons, plus Karen takes care of the serious aspects of family life.

Recalling and observing the oddities of life

I don't remember much about algebra (there's a song in that line). However, I tend to retain strange-but-true facts and situations. It's pretty easy to take all this odd information I learn and put it into the book.

- Also, I can remember when someone tells me their...
- ~ claim to fame, or
- ~ unique oddity.

For example, a fellow college student could name most of the train lines in the US.

Such interesting people!

To paraphrase Will Rogers, I've never met a boring person. Each one has remarkable qualities.

What people notice

Others learn a lot about the world. I ask them about it, and they tell me. For instance, I knew a man in the uniform business, and he was always studying these kinds of clothes. If he was in a restaurant and didn't know what brand of uniform the waitress was wearing, he'd ask to look inside her collar. (Hey! He was serious.)

Guy talking outside male parameters

Most men only want to talk masculine subjects, but not me. Examples of my lack of manly-manned-ness:

- ~ I don't have power tools.
- ~ I'm not interested in sports.
- ~ I'm the worst at playing sports.
- ~ My stories don't make me the winner.
- ~ I know nothing about cars.
- ~ I don't get a rush from such thrill-seeking activities as jet skiing and snow mobiling

I really like talking about...

- ~ TV trivia
- ~ pop culture
- ~ family
- ~ observations
- ~ people's insights
- ~ politics
- ~ amateur psychology, sociology and philosophy

In support of kids and TV

I'm glad my sons watch TV – as long as it's providing them something. Let's tally it up:

Educational TV is sort-of OK, because it has:

- 0 entertainment
- 1 school education
- 0 street education
- 1 total

Cartoons are better, because they have:

- 1 entertainment
- 0 school education
- 1 street education
- 2 total

Live televised police chases are best, because they have:

- 1 entertainment
- 1 school education
- 1 street education
- 3 total

What's the school education in a police chase? C'mon!

Writing

I'm a copywriter

I write advertising copy, and I'm honored to be in that profession.

The best part is figuring out how to connect with the audience. And the basic-est fundamental I need to remember is: Put the audience first. I try to write less about what I want to say, and more about what the audience wants to read.

Comedian Rip Taylor said it best: "Without an audience there is no performance."

My life sentence

Here it is: I will write about my life. The people around me are aware that I do this, and I think they know that I focus on the positive.

I don't get vacations from my writing, and in many ways, writing is the vacation. If I had to choose between a week of...

- ~ traveling to Paris and not writing about it, or
- ~ sitting in our house and writing

I'd choose our house. But don't tell Karen, because I think she'd prefer Paris.

I'm always analyzing

The moment I see anything it gets examined.

For example, right now I'm in a chain fast-food place. Here's what I noticed in the last 30 minutes. The restaurant...

~ plays that terrible light smooth fusion jazz in the background. In the 1970s, public places had "elevator music," and it was laughed into oblivion. But smooth jazz has replaced elevator music, and it's worse.

~ doesn't offer a low-fat breakfast menu anymore. Fast-food customers won't admit it, but they demand pig fat in the morning.

Aspects of writing

Not financially dependent on this book

If my livelihood came from book writing...

- 1) I'd be penniless.
- 2) I couldn't be as annoying as I prefer to be.

Writing for a long time

I wrote my first story at age six (it was called "Easter Bunny Peter"). For over three decades, many kind people have gone miles out of their way to help me. However, they need to give me financial endowments, because I'm running low on cash.

Staying on top of the world

It's obvious that my environment runs me, and I have no say in the matter. However, I get to write down my perceptions of this environment...so it's a fair trade.

Word world

More than anything else, I love words, sentences, paragraphs and so forth. (Note I didn't say anyone else.) I'm obsessed with the English language – I can't control it.

I'm supposed to say my obsession has turned me into one of the world's best writers and grammarians (a specialist in how words combine – I looked it up), but no! Millions of people are better writers than me, and lots of them are teenagers, for gosh sake.

So, my English obsession is more nutty than practical. I just operate in my little zone, and that's that.

Real entertainment

I refuse to like anything I've been told I need to like but I really don't like. For example, I've rarely heard a good poem. I'm sorry! I'll read one and think, "So what?"

Questionable classics

I'll get my library card revoked for saying this, but most of the "classics" I've read are terrible. Terrible! For example, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* is a marathon snore. Also, *Tartuffe* is not a funny play. I'm waaaay far from being conversant with the classics, but I've read enough to know that each one should be eyed with suspicion.

Alternatively, I admire this legendary movie company owner. He had a behind-meter. If he was screening a film and his backside started wriggling in the chair, he knew his behind-meter was going off, and he didn't like the movie, and it wasn't going to find an audience. Similarly, my writing gets compared to people's behinds.

The Circle

The Circle is a term for everyone with an ongoing presence in my life. I'm not being an egomaniac – we've each got a circle, and we're a part of other people's circles.

When I see a person walking by, sometimes I'll realize she's not just her. Almost certainly, she's at the center of three worlds:

- ~ family
- ~ friends
- ~ work

It's mind-boggling to imagine all those people around each person, but that's how it really works.

Some of the rules of the book

Nice, good, and pretty

In order to keep the peace, no person, place or thing in *Mom Letters* gets ranked higher than nice, good or pretty. Also, please remain calm if I don't say a person, place or thing is nice, good or pretty. The person, place or thing might well be nice, good or pretty. I'm just trying to take value judgments out of the equation, because they'll only get me in hot water.

The one exception is the Cape Girardeau, Missouri VA residence my Dad lived in. I will always describe their facilities as outstanding, and anyone who's been there would understand why I say this.

Family celebrities

The media has us convinced that all the celebrities are on the stage and screen, but that's wrong – so wrong it's scary. The truth is, there are stars in any close-knit group. Outside the group, they might be just ordinary folks – and that's fine with them.

In *Mom Letters*, I'm taking a lot of celebrities in my circles and introducing them to a larger world. I hope readers will see how they could easily do the same with their stars.

Most families weren't on the afternoon scream shows

Most American families haven't thrown chairs at each other on national TV. I don't recall the rest of my point here.

Oh

Oh – let me put in a statement: I'm responsible for all the content mistakes. If I said something that caused any problems anywhere, please

let me know so I can straighten everything out at...
<http://www.geocities.com/brackitt>

Influences from the media

Which movies, books, etc. inspired me in the writing of this book?
Thanks for asking. I'm about to show you a bunch of them. Note: To make this manageable, I'm narrowing the topic – “media influences for the book,” rather than “all influences in life.”

Autobiography: *Ball Four*

It's a journal of a defined period – in this case a baseball season. Author Jim Bouton comments on the oddities around him, and he tells what really goes on in major league baseball.

Autobiography: *A Book* by Desi Arnaz

Hundreds of celebrities have their stories ghost written, and it makes them sound over-polished, phony, and generic. The books never read the way those celebrities speak. But Desi Arnaz told his life story into a tape recorder, let his words go straight into *A Book*, and wrote the most spontaneous story I've ever read. It feels like Desi's talking to me, and his voice is unmistakable.

It's now popular to make writing sound relaxed and informal. Many Manhattan-based magazines think they invented the off-the-cuff style. But Desi did it years before them, and that's what counts.

Extra note: The greatest spontaneous writer ever was Groucho Marx.

Autobiography: two by Mark Twain

- 1) *Life on the Mississippi* tells a history of that river.
- 2) *Roughing It* explains Clemens' life during the San Francisco Gold Rush.

Clemens is the king of...
~ telling funny stories.
~ including one-liners that punch up his writing.
~ allowing himself to be the stupid one.
~ making singular observations.
~ skipping the flowery descriptions and writing interesting ones instead.

Movie: *Purple Rain*

I could be wrong, but I think they took the real people in Prince's circle and wrote a fictional story that involved all of them. In the film, most of Prince's friends played themselves.

Movie: *Star Trek II: The Wrath of Khan*

Mr. Spock gives away his katra – all the knowledge he’s gained in his life. He’s supposed to pass it on to someone before he dies.

The idea of a katra obsesses me. Could a person...

- ~ write down everything important he sees, hears, learns and thinks.
- ~ organize the content in a logical way.
- ~ make it something others would care about.

Movie: *Zelig*

Woody Allen’s Zelig took on the persona of anyone he was physically close to, and I’m exactly like that. It’s weird. There are at least 30 different personalities in me (call the mental ward!), and I can adopt any one of them as necessary.

So, let’s say I meet a fellow to begin work on something, and he seems very serious. I’ll automatically fall into one of my serious personalities, maintain it in our conversations, and hope this helps us advance the work.

Importantly, my core message stays the same, no matter which...

- ~ personality I’m using.
- ~ person I’m talking to.

But there will be vast differences in the...

- ~ way I present the core message.
- ~ statements I make to get that message across.

In *Mom Letters*, I communicate using my “talking with Mom” personality. This is miles different from, say, my “talking with Brother Sam” personality.

Movie cartoons: 1940s Warner Brothers

One of the creators (I can’t remember which) said, “We only did things we thought were funny – not what we thought the audience would think was funny.”

That’s the key! In *Mom Letters*, almost everything I’m presenting as funny strikes me as funny.

More important, these cartoons taught me so much that school couldn’t. I’ve learned about....

- ~ life in the first half of the 20th century.
- ~ songs that were popular during that time.
- ~ something else, if I could remember it.

TV sitcom: *Green Acres*

It's the classic comedic circle: A fairly normal man is surrounded by off-the-wall people and a pig.

The Green Acres man is lawyer/farmer Oliver Wendall Douglas, and he always acts as I think I would. Oliver enjoys interacting with those around him – glad to see them, happy to spend time with them. But then they'll do something bizarre, and Oliver is the only one who sees it that way.

For example, everyone understands Arnold when he's oinking...except Oliver.

Paul Henning is the man behind *Green Acres* and *The Beverly Hillbillies*, and he's the funniest sitcom producer in history.

TV news segment: "A Few Minutes with Andy Rooney"

Mr. Rooney is clever with his few minutes. Through most of it, he doesn't outright say, "This is a stupid product." Instead, he asks pointed questions about the product – and lets it hang itself.

Also, Mr. Rooney gets a lot out of his time. He doesn't mess with lengthy...

- ~ introductions
- ~ transitions
- ~ histories
- ~ explanations
- ~ exceptions
- ~ qualifiers

Mr. Rooney jumps in, makes his case, makes it entertaining, and finishes.

Cop show: *Dragnet*

Almost all of the scenes have Joe Friday in them. Reason: This show is told in the First Person. That is, it presents the story from one cop's perspective. So, there are no scenes where the burglars say, "That Joe Friday is coming after us – let's get him first."

A weak producer couldn't handle the First Person. He'd say, "We need a big scene where the burglars are breaking in." He can't set boundaries for himself, because he's mediocre and needs as much playing room as possible.

Jack Webb was a terrific producer, and his First Person approach really grabs me. I watch *Dragnet*, I become Joe Friday, and I get as mad at the criminals as Joe does. (OK, that's not possible.)

Note: *The Wonder Years* is also a First Person show. There aren't many of them.

TV drama: *Dallas*

I'm a fan of having big families stay under one roof after most of them should be gone. It would be fantastic if we Brackitts could all live together in some sprawling home – sign me up. If brother Al wants to be like JR and become the evil oldest brother... well, he already is.

Writing the letters to Mom is the next best thing to having us Brackitts together. It's my little way of connecting us.

Talk show host: Kathie Lee Gifford

Kathie Lee can do something 250 million others can't: She can tell almost everything about herself and her day-to-day life. When she does something *really* embarrassing, she'll inform the world about it. That's difficult.

Radio: "Paul Harvey News & Comment"

Paul Harvey...
~ tells oddball stories.
~ edits them down to their most essential parts.
~ delivers them in rapid succession.
~ is highly disciplined – he hasn't changed the format in decades.

Overall, Paul Harvey works for his listeners. He doesn't seem to give a hoot about being part of the news industry elite. As a result, he's #1 in many categories, but I rarely hear the froofy media commentators talk about him. I hope he takes that as an honor.

Comic strip: "Blondie"

Dagwood is a fitting role model for me, although I imagine myself a little cooler. Also, cartoonist Chic Young had an idea: The Bumsteads' infant son Baby Dumpling would actually age along with the Youngs' infant son. [Reference: *Backstage at the Strips* book by Mort Walker.]

Newspaper column: Erma Bombeck

What a groundbreaking writer! It was the 1970s, and all these working mothers were trying to match what their full-time mothers had done. The pressures on moms were enormous...but Bombeck's funny column provided a release valve. She took a witty view of family challenges, and millions laughed with her.

Magazine: Mad Magazine

There's a joke in every frame. If one falls flat, another one is only 25 words away. This keeps the reader marching along.

Also, Mad's cynical brand of comedy transcends the ages. I'd watch 1950s TV shows and would conclude that was an innocent time. But 1950s Mad Magazines tore those shows apart – showed how inane they were.

So...there's always one small group that gets it, and many of them write or read Mad Magazine.

Most of the credit for Mad goes to founder and publisher Bill Gaines. He's the most underrated producer of comedy in the 20th century.

Magazine Series: Sherlock Holmes

Arthur Conan Doyle wrote stories for a London magazine, and unless I'm wrong, he came up with a novel idea: Sherlock Holmes is a fictional character, but he's real and close to 1890s Londoners – the ones reading the stories. The sleuth conducts his adventures in well-known local places, and his fictitious residence is nearby on Baker Street.

To make it even more real, you, the 1890s London reader, are almost encouraged to visit the detective if you have a problem. Holmes doesn't charge, and he's bored when there's nothing challenging going on. A visitor who sits in Holmes' parlor will say, essentially, "I read about you in the magazine." It all ties together perfectly!

In short, Conan Doyle created an ingenious mix of reality and fiction.

Album: *Bill Cosby*

Obviously, Bill Cosby is the king of stories about life with small children. The album named above is the first of many Cosby records our family bought.

Album: The Sex Pistols' first and only record

The Pistols shot a giant hole in the bloated music industry, and then quickly self-destructed. This band taught me to never trade innovation for possible cash.

Song: "Laugh at Me"

Sonny Bono had it all figured out. In the 1970s, he was glad to play the buffoon, because it worked for the singing duo. That was a courageous thing to do, because millions of people mistakenly thought he was a less than brilliant man. Only a secure person could do that.

When Sonny was a Congressman, two groups of politicians were in a room arguing with each other. Sonny decided to get everyone laughing about it all, and they were finally able to make some progress. Later,

someone asked Sonny to explain his diplomacy. Sonny replied, “Don’t you see? I’m not being funny to be funny.”

Play: *Cyrano De Bergerac*

Edmond Rostand wrote such a popular main storyline (the love triangle) that most don’t know the other part of the play. Cyrano loved words, and he died fighting for the freedom to write what he wanted to.

13.3 What

What is *Mom Letters*

Quick summary

Mom Letters is a collection of e-mails that chronicles (big word) my family's life in 1999. There's a chapter for each month.

History of the book

My Mom and Dad met at a St. Louis university sock hop in November 1956. They married in 1958, made St. Louis their home, and launched four loser sons. (More of this history is covered in the "Goodbye to the old St. Louis home" – the February section.)

In 1987, Dad had a stroke. While he recovered from it completely, a series of minor strokes after that slowly wore him down. Since Dad was a veteran (Navy officer for 3 1/2 years – never saw warfare, but saw Europe), he was eligible for VA benefits.

In November 1996, he moved to an outstanding VA residence in Cape Girardeau, MO – about 2 1/2 hours south of St. Louis. Since he had spent over 40 years of his life in the Gateway City, living far away was a separation for him – and us. Mom drove down often, but anyone who's been in this situation understands that it's difficult.

In Spring 1997, I started writing Dad letters – just to bring us closer. I'd type three pages of "here's what's going on" updates. I faxed them to Dad and he was pleased. Also, the VA staff seemed happily surprised someone was using their fax machine for this purpose.

At this point, the story takes two different paths then comes back together.

Path 1: My father passed away in November 1997. The least important fact about this is that I stopped my letters.

I started the letters again in Spring 1998 and sent them to my mom. Specifically, my concern was that Grandma and her grandsons didn't get to see each other enough, because we live six hours away from each other. Writing the stories was an opportunity to unite them more frequently. This remains the single greatest reason for the Mom Letters.

Path 2: Naturally, I wanted to get some mileage out of my Dad Letters. I also e-mailed them to my mom and three older brothers. The brothers sent back insulting comments, and I realized something odd was going on. My brothers actually took the time to read family letters? So, I expanded the

group to include other family members and friends, and I was encouraged by the response.

Why 1999

Although I started in 1997, the book only covers 1999 because...

- 1) my earlier stuff was particularly terrible.
- 2) it makes more sense to start the book on January 1 and end it on December 31.

Oh, here's something: Though the book covers 1999, I didn't want to focus on the national events of that year. So, I never say, "I'm watching Clinton get impeached..." Reason: These days, we're inundated with information about big events, so I skipped all that.

De-chronologicalizing

When I originally wrote the Mom Letters, they came out chronologically – as one would expect. But they were a disorganized mess. A 1/2 page family story was followed by an exchange with the kids, then an observation, etc. Maybe this variety sounds OK now, but it asked too much of the reader.

In January 2000, I resolved to turn that pile of blee-blah into a book, so I began sifting and sorting.

How much of this is true?

Good question! For a lot of reasons, this book is being classified as a novel – a work of pure fiction.

It's an attempt at comedy

Love of funny

Abraham Lincoln (former president) equated laughing with the high that comes from drinking alcohol, and that's what laughing is for me. I enjoy everything about guffawing, and it's mostest funno to be around others who see the humor in life. So, just as those who write books on abnormal behavior are secretly abnormal, I wrote a "lighter side" book because I enjoy laughing.

Also, the letters forum suits my inadequacies. For example, each segment doesn't require a big punch line ending. That's good, because often I don't have one. Like right now.

Another thing: I don't delude myself about what is and isn't funny. A sitcom producer can turn his laugh track up to "hysterical," but that won't make me laugh.

Those three words (make me laugh) are key, because true laughter is an involuntary response – look it up! This is why a lot of us don't like the sound we make when we really laugh. But that's the laugh I'm going for, and we'll see what happens.

Not including serious family matters

There are at least 50 books for every major family problem, so I need not cover those subjects in *Mom Letters*.

Hardest and easiest

The hardest part to write was...

Brother Sam's profile, though ultimately everything worked out great. Sam has led a more straightforward and serious life, and I'm lazy. I like writing wacky stories on the subject.

The easiest part to write was...

dialog with the kids.

A family book by a warped figure

Banging on the boundaries

This is not a daring book – it's about as controversial as a letter to Mom. But while I don't want to cross the line into polemics (being controversial as a practice – the dictionary told me), I try to come close to it. It's part of the fun. Readers get to see me walk the tightrope, and they can decide whether I fall.

Equally important, this book follows the children. So, they automatically form the shape and content of it.

Clean is easier to absorb

I like seeing extreme theatrical movies that are cleaned up for broadcast TV. It's relaxing, because I know they can only go so far.

Likewise, people can read this book and know that I'm working to keep it G-rated. Emphasis on working.

The better side of me

The letters to Mom display my friendlier self. I mean, if we read Benedict Arnold's letters to his mother, we'd probably conclude he was a nice guy. So too with me.

The reality is that I curse a lot, and if someone writes me and takes the filthy low road, I will gladly join him on that journey. This doesn't explain why I sometimes initiate unprintable e-mails, and I'll address that subject at another time.

A caricaturist with words

I go to the amusement park, and there's the caricaturist. He's drawing a picture of seven-year-old girl subject, and he's exaggerating her features in a "positively comical" way. The girl sees her portrait, and she laughs! It's so funny to see herself from that crazy perspective.

I try to be just like that caricaturist...only I use a computer keyboard. The people around me say and do hundreds of "positively comical" things. I enjoy writing about them, and (knock on wood) everyone puts up this.

I have very few contributions to make in the world of "created comedy." The world is the one being funny, and I'm simply pointing it out.

Content

A life

I'm trying to connect with readers by showing them my world – father of three and husband of one. You should feel you're there, but you don't need to take out the trash...unless you insist.

I'm hoping the reader will say, "I could see how that happens," and, "Oh, I've gotten into that situation. How is he gonna get out of it?" I'm delighted when a reader tells me solutions to the problems. I'm still ready to hear about a smart and cheap alarm clock.

Obscure but noteworthy

I'm also trying to connect by talking about an odd subject and having the reader say, "Yes! I've noticed that too. I'm glad someone wrote about it."

When my writing is mistaken, it can also start good conversations. For example, I said that Chicago's corner bakeries were thriving in spite of the invasion of supermarkets. Friend Marco (lifetime Chicagoan) said unh unh – there used to be many more bakeries.

Side note: "I" means Identifiable

Strange as it may seem, I'm not very interested in writing about me, me, me. I use the first person "I" because it's the fastest way to connect with the reader. Here's a comparison:

"I" way: "I can't stand most VCRs, because..."

Another way: "I hope you agree with me that most VCRs have big problems. For example..."

The "I" way gets us to the crux of the matter quicker, and that's what really counts.

Events of everyday life

To be sure, police and firefighters have the tough lives. Mine is more like swimming in a pool of pudding – slow and gloppy. But this is the life I have to write about, and that fact can't change.

Kids trying to be older than they are

That makes for entertainment, because they say and do creative/unexpected things.

I don't like losing the past!

Many people I'm close to are in the past, and they can't come back. Writing about them and the times we lived in seems to bring everything back, so I'm delighted to scribble about the olden days – even if they're only a week old.

Behind the scenes

I prefer watching rehearsals to the actual performance. It's more revealing to see what the group is working to achieve than what they finally present.

Likewise, a lot of *Mom Letters* is about how members of my family operate when they aren't in front of the world, and it's frightening.

Keeping the setting small

Mom Letters doesn't play on a big stage – the story is mostly set in our house and neighborhood.

This gets at something I've always enjoyed: prison movies. That's because I know the setting will be contained, and the inmates have fewer options – they can't run out to the hardware store and buy 100 feet of rope. Since I'm certain that I already know their options, I'm mesmerized when they have new schemes.

A good example is written in Thomas E. Gaddis' book, *Birdman of Alcatraz*. Robert Stroud (the central character) wanted two special birds. However, if he requested them from the warden, those birds would be a privilege, and the guards could take them away at will. ...

Solution: Stroud talked another prisoner into asking for the birds. The fellow did, but he took poor care of them. A guard didn't like seeing this, and he said Stroud would be a better owner. So, our man had his birds.

Relatedly, I like movies that take a leisurely pace and still hold my interest. Obviously, it's hard to do. One example is *Driving Miss*

Daisy. That film progressed at a “rural south speed,” and I enjoyed slowing my pace to match the movie’s. Then, any time they raised the drama a little...I was gripped! When that can of food was missing, well I was paying attention.

Compare that to a big action movie, where they’ll blow up an entire city and I’ll feel nothing.

Rotten situations provide comedy

A lot of people tell self-promotional stories: “Look what I did.” Fine. But the better stories tell a truthful, identifiable, and humorous tale of woe.

In my case, these stories come rather easy, because the more I try to do things right the more they turn out wrong. This is no comedy – it’s completely true and sad. Should I start doing the wrong things more often? Maybe I’ll try that.

And I have to revise what I said in the first paragraph. Most brag stories aren’t fine – they’re terrible. Speaking as an unlicensed psychiatric expert: If a person brags on himself too often, he probably has deep self-doubts, but he’s in denial over them. Telling these stories gives him the momentary high he needs, but they sure don’t help the listener.

Rule of thumb: “Others want to hear what you’d never want to say.”

Positive scheming

Let it be stated: Even in functional families, a lot of personal maneuvering takes place. For example: Karen will ask me five different ways to do something, and I’ll perform five creative acts to squirm off the hook.

I could write a lot about how much this family loves each other, but that would bore the reader. Didn’t we learn in English class that conflict is the foundation of most good stories? (That’s not rhetorical – I really can’t remember.) My conflict is Man vs. Intelligence.

13.4 When

This was inadequately covered in the “What” category, under “History of the Book.”

13.5 Where

Chicago, St. Louis and the surrounding areas.

13.6 Why

Why was this book written?

First, these are letters to my mom, and those reasons are explained in the What section. Beyond that, I had three objectives in writing this book:

1. Entertain the reader.
2. See if I could present an “easily identifiable world.”
3. Deliver interesting information.

Why the letter format

The best reason: They started as letters, so keeping them letters makes sense.

Second best reason: A collection of “letters to Mom” sets the parameters well. I limit myself to content that interests my mom, rather than trying to be all things to everyone. For instance, my mother enjoys looking at houses, so I make it a point to describe homes in the letters.

Third best reason: A letter gets dashed off, so I can end it with a fast and friendly...

Talk to you soon!

Jack Brackitt
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