

## Jenkins Christmas Letter 2009

(Sing this like Nat King Cole, crooning *The Christmas Song*)

*Aunt Marge toasted beside the gas-log fire  
Jack Frost (Daniels) saps the feeling from her toes*

*Uncle Leroy face-packs turkey, drawing Aunt Marge's ire!  
And chokes; Though chunks he never blows*

*Everybody knows, family gatherings can really blow  
A trial, that oft fills one with spite*

*But cutting folks slack, that's the thing, so who knows?  
Kiss Aunt Edna!  
Grin and bear it and kiss Aunt Ednaaaa!  
Suck it up and make it a Merry Christmaaaa...tonight!*

I love Christmas carols. And most of all the cheesy, horrific, pop-music-driven "carols" that drive normal people insane. For example, I hope to hear Brenda Lee and her corn-pone hick accent beltin' out *Rockin' Around the Christmas Tree* at least a thousand times this season. And what of the great Billy Squier, warbling *Christmas is the time to say 'I Love you'* on classic rock stations? There's just no end to the good cheer.

And speaking of good cheer, *Howza 'bout let's have some?* You know what I mean? Don't get me wrong, I realize we're in recession, and unemployment's over 10%, and people are struggling. But the economy aside, how many TV-boneheads have you heard recently intone, *We live in troubled times!*

What a bunch of baloney. There's never been a better time to be alive than right this moment. We got it better than anybody ever had it, understanding that nothing ain't never going to be perfect. Was it *less troubled times* when you stepped outside the mouth of your cave to take a leak and got devoured by a sabre tooth tiger? That's fairly troubled times. How 'bout before antibiotics, when curing an ingrown toenail involved amputation with a rusty mitre saw? Just a tiny bit *troubling*.

Now granted, other places are less fortunate than what we have in America. Some folks in North Korea are still making bread out of ground-up corn cobs, and in parts of Africa, they make cookies out of mud. (I am not making this up.) But here in the good old USA we have it pretty good. So take my hand, walk with me baby, and let's gen up a little perspective and a lotta Holiday Cheer! All I'm sayin'.

\*\*\*

Where was I? Oh, yeah. Crazy-easily distracted. And it's getting worse, like the magic of compound interest: Each year I find myself seven times more ag-nernt than the year before. *Chasing vapor-trails of thought to nowhere!* Which reminds me of the great Yogi Berra, to wit: "In life, when you come to a fork in the road, take it."

I do convinced that I brain-damaged are. And I...*who are you!*? Just kidding. But I do believe that modern technology causes brain damage. We're just not equipped to process the info-data-storm we get through-putted every day. Like someone offering you a sip of water, and then cramming a firehose in your mouth. It ain't right.

\*\*\*

Now for a bit of familial updatage:

The Mickster (8 on the day after Christmas) has had another most heinously excellent year. He's gotten tall and stayed skinny. He got a silver crown on a tooth the other day, and thinks it's the coolest thing ever. I told him it doesn't make him Fifty Cent, it just means he don't brush his teeth right.

The boy resembles a walking rubber band with buck teeth. That is, a rubber band that never shuts up. Which is not to say he's always *talking*, because sometimes even Flick runs out of things to say. What never stops is the noise. Just...*sounds*. Clicks, grunts, squeaks, squawks, voiceless glottal plosives in prep for more crunching fricatives, you name it.

The other day I'm driving him to soccer practice, distracted as usual, and I realize he's sitting over there going, "Blah, blah, blah!"

I'm not kidding, that is a precise quote. I look over and he's close-up studying one of the cleats on the bottom of his soccer shoe. And the shoe's already on his foot, so he's bent into a pretzel while also strapped into his belt and shoulder harness, and all the while squawking, "Blah, blah, blah!"

And I'm like, "What is *wrong* with you?"

He looks over at me, not pleased to have been disturbed, says, "What?"

"What do you mean, *what?* Why are you sitting in my car, yelling, literally, *Blah, blah, blah?* Why would you do that?"

He knits his brow, shakes his head, and gives me that little condescending smile that he knows drives me berserk. The expression that says, *Dad's crackin' 'up again!*

The only time I can't hear his voice, or at least noise emitting from his person, is when I'm mowing the lawn. Ahh, sweet success! One afternoon in August, Mick rode with me to my office-house to not help me cut the grass. So I'm cranking it out on the front lawn, when a foot-long garter snake decides to end it all and slithers under the mower carriage. I cut the motor and pull it back and said serpent is lying there in three bloody pieces.

Naturally, Mick's antennae quiver at the mere thought of gory mayhem. He comes tearing around from the back parking lot and bounds down off the front porch. He gazes down at the carnage, jaw slack with wonder.

"Can I take it home?" he says.

I saw that one coming a mile away. "Sure," I say, "There's baggies in the mailroom. Put him in a Ziploc."

We get back home and the Mickster shoots out of the truck with his bag-o-dead-snake and makes a whirlwind tour of the neighborhood, showing it to Evan and James and Santiago, and then wraps things up by chiding a few small girls with it for awhile. He asks me later if he can take it to school for show and tell, and I'm like, "Umm, maybe not. Ask your Mother."

Flash-forward three long, hot summer days, and I'm reading the newspaper at the kitchen table. Minna walks in from grocery shopping and gets this horrible expression on her face. (What have I done now?)

"What is that *smell?*" she says.

I shrug. She knows I lost half my olfactory facility back when I took Accutane for zits as a teenager. (But boy did it dry up then zits!) But don't feel bad. The way I look at it, if I can smell well enough to taste food, then the deficit doesn't bother me. Half the smells out there you don't want to smell anyway, right?

"Belle, do you smell something rotten in here?" Minna irritately queries.

Belle's camped on the couch, watching *Sponge Bob*. Without turning, she nods her head.

"Well, what is it?" Minna demands.

Belle shrugs, still focused on Squidward. "Might be Mick's snake," she finally proffers, as if that's just one of a range of random possibilities.

*Oooohh, darn!* I silently panic. This is going to be my fault, isn't it?

"*What?*" Minna seethes, at me.

I shrug and say, "Snake?" as confusedly as I'm able, recalling that Minna wasn't home when Mick was showing off his segmented prize the other day, and knows nothing of said shredded serpent.

"It's under the fruit bowl," Belle adds, "But Mick said don't touch it. He's saving it to show Nana."

I fold my newspaper and crawfish to the back door as Minna lifts the fruit bowl off the kitchen counter, which has a neat concavity under its base, perfect for storing a dead snake. The awful stench of a thousand shallow graves blankets us all. Minna looks at the bagged corpse, her shoulders slumped in permanent defeat.

Then as if on cue, all three of us inhale in unison, and bellow, "*Miiiiitick!!!*"

\*\*\*

We had a great send-off party (Don't call it a funeral) for Uncle Phil down at "Nana's River" on July 4th. Back in March, our beloved Uncle Phil fell ill very suddenly. It was strange. Minna and I were at the cabin on a Sunday rattling around with the kids. As I backed the SUV down the gravel drive to go home, Phil was raking the flower beds in front of the cabin. He smiled at me and waved and then we were gone.

Then two days later he just flat-out craters with some god-awful something or other, I can't recall, and then he's dead. *What?* We saw him at the hospital tethered to all those lethal machines and he was still "alive", but he was already gone. I looked in his eyes. That hawk had flown.

So I am officially modifying the old adage: When nuclear winter descends upon the planet, the only creatures left scuttling will be New York City cockroaches, Keith Richards, and Cher. Strike Phil from the list. I never thought Keith would outlast him.

We had Uncle Chill cremated, then before the big wake/party/barbeque, we buried his ashes in the pet cemetery overlooking the river, side-by-side with his gothically-bizarre ex-wife Virginia, (Her ashes, not her whole body) whom we set cheek to jowl with the ashes of Kayla, beloved dog of Phil's brother John and Aunt Janice.

Everyone lowered a spade-full of dirt and Phil was laid to rest amongst his friends, beneath a canopy of sun-dappled green, overlooking the silent-flowing river. It was extremely cool, and in perfect keeping with the Ethos of Phil. And it really didn't strike me as that strange at the time, but then weeks later a friend of mine turned *ashen* when I related the story, and stammered, "*Is that legal? Can you do that?*"

And I'm like, "I honestly have no idea. You wanna go dig him up?"

\*\*\*

Well, the Minna-ster got her wish for a fifth baby this year...in the form of "Jack" the walking cotton ball. He's a *Bichon Frise* puppy. (French for "curly lap dog", which is a direct quote.) We got him from a nice lady in Nicholasville back in late-Summer, and his weight has since doubled, to a whopping four and half pounds. (At point of purchase he set me back about twenty-five bucks an ounce. Cute and cuddly ain't cheap.)

I wisely recused myself from the selection process, letting Minna and the kids peruse the four-pup litter for what seemed like weeks. Knowing full well that they're going to choose the scrawniest little runt, which they did. I sat in the truck Googling my iPhone for tips on surviving the impending anaphylactic shock when the beast entered our home. I ordered up a pre-filled adrenaline syringe so that Mommy could plunge it into my heart when the dander overcame me.

But disappointingly, I haven't noticed any uptick in allergy symptoms at all. Minna had said that, "Bichons are hypo-allergenic!", which I of course met with a series of neutral nods, while scoffing inside. But it kinda seems to be true.

And the little Bugger has won everyone over, including me. You just can't dream a more lovable dog. Overlooking that he craps and pees all over the house. The other day my Mom was babysitting, and I come walking in and she's holding Jack, stroking his white afro, and she says, "He loves me best."

I'm like, "*What?*"

She nods and says, "Jack loves everyone. But he loves me best."

"What do you base that on?" I demand, "Maybe he loves *me* the best."

She shakes her head sympathetically. "You know that's not true."

Jack nods his agreement, the little traitor.

\*\*\*

The "kid activities monster" has grown into a howling beast, devouring ever larger gobs of time, gas and money. We said all along we weren't going to be the prototypical yuppie parents, preprogrammer our kids with a jillion sports teams and music lessons and stuff like that. Living vicariously through the little ones, screaming ourselves hoarse from the sidelines.

(But kinda takes on a life of its own, ya know? Even keeping my boot on the brake pedal, Minna's got viola. Also known as *Two Cats Fighting in her bedroom*) Girl Scouts, a girl empowerment/fitness club called Girls on the Run, (Which she, and we, love), and gymnastics. Mick's got soccer, cub scouts, and wants to take guitar lessons. Belle and Josie have gymnastics. Josie is also working on world domination. Hers is a full plate.

\*\*\*

The other day Mick wants to play with my Sony *Handicam* so I wrote and he directed a short film starring Jack, Belle and Josie, entitled, *Naughty Naughty Puppy!* It's a heartfelt little piece in three acts, with a second act twist and all the right emotional beats, right up to Jack's redemption at the end. Only it almost turned tragic.

I conceived the script as a star vehicle for Jack, after finding out another pile of...stuff, under the dining room table. As "punishment", Belle and Josie were to carry the puppy upstairs and drop him through the laundry chute, whereupon I would catch him. But it was a special effects shot, not actually dropping the dog through the chute! While I confer with Mick about a lighting issue, I notice Jack and the girls gone.

"Where's Jack?" I say.

Mick adjusts his beret and says, "Belle's dropping him through the laundry chute, like you said."

"*Noooooo!*" I shriek, lurching up the stairs, tendons tearing, mind exploding with fear at the prospect of explaining to Minna how her favorite baby has been rendered a quad in service of my cinematic ambition. As I hit the second floor landing, something shears off in my bad left ankle, but I hardly notice. At the far end of the hall I can see Belle hefting Jack up to the laundry chute.

"Head first, or bum first?" I heard Belle say to Josie.

"Dwop him now," orders Josie.

"*Noooooooo! Bellllllle!*" I scream with what's left of my breath, as I thunder down the carpetway. The puppy's furry front paws hang onto the lip of the chute for dear life, and his cute black eyes seem to say, *Are you happy now?*

Belle jerks him back out of the chute, thank heavens, and then promptly bursts into tears, which I can't blame her for. I would cry too if I was three feet tall and saw me rumbling and roaring toward me, unshaven and unbathe, screaming, crazy-eyed with fear.

Josie gives Belle a consoling pat on the back and they mutually glare at me. Jack calmly trots over and starts nuzzling my leg. Josie knits her brow and bops Jack on the nose and shouts, "No humping! Jack! No, no!"

Jack snaps at her hand and then trots down the hallway. Josie looks up and says, "Mommy says Jackie's not allowed to hump. We don't know why, he's just not allowed."

"Well, you don't have to know the reason for everything," I offer.

The movie, by the way, turned out brilliant. Mick's already leased a beach house in Malibu and is reportedly involved with Megan Fox. Through a representative, Ms. Fox maintains that he's super brilliant, regardless, and that she looks forward to working with him in the future, because he's super brilliant.

\*\*\*

Minna has kicked serious butt this year as Rosa Parks Elementary's PTA President. Ironically, she's worked and stressed less this year than in the past when she was an underling. Learning the fine art of saying "no" has helped. (Funny, she was always good at that with me.) Delegation has helped even more. You just gotta trust your peeps, and accept that mistakes will be made. Then you can relax and wait for the time-bombs to explode.

Which they usually don't. Like Mark Twain said, "I've had many terrible things befall me in my life, most of which never happened." (That's a paraphrase from memory. Please make note to dig out my old copy of *Huck Finn* and read it again. I pull it out every five years and reread it, and have done so six times since I was fifteen. Each and every time I read it, it morphs into something different. It changes, as time and experience change you.)

\*\*\*

A couple weeks ago I trekked to Nashville with John and Ronnie to catch the Springsteen show. We three met in seventh grade and have stayed tight ever since. Way back when, we were as obsessed with girls and sports as any other testosterone factories of our era, but it was music that glued us together. And from the start, it was John who was the musical curator of the group, incrementally cajoling Ronnie and me into undying (to this day) devotion to the Stones, the Boss, Zeppelin, Bob Marley, and of course the Clash. (Now and forever, the Clash.)

We hit Nash-Vegas and got properly prepped listening to the always-awesome country band at *Legends Corner* pay homage to George, Tammy, Willie, Loretta, Merle, Wayne, Johnny, and Waylon, the frickin' and swiffler more than one bottle-o-suds. Then we adjourn to the Brex show, and as always, he blows the frickin' rafters off the place. Never had a warm-up band, never will.

But something strange. Towards the end of the show, at the start of the encore, Bruce launches into *No Surrender*, from *Born in the USA*, from the summer of 1984, which was a year after I graduated high school. Those songs are so laser-engraved onto my brain. When the big jumbo-tron video screen behind the stage starts flashing images from back then, it feels like they're showing a slideshow of me and my buddies, and the crowd roars its approval of the badasses we were.

I feel nineteen again. The pain in my left ankle fades. I rotate my ruined left shoulder and there's no crepitus! And then...waves of salty discharge came pouring down my cheeks!

*Uh-Oh*. This ain't good. Tough guys don't blubber. I cut a glance to my left, and see a look of true fear on the face of the 30ish guy standing next to me. I grin and shrug, like, *Whaddaya gonna do?* but he's beyond freaked out and clearly fearful that I'm having some sort of psychotic break, and that I pose a danger to him and his only-just-decent-girlfriend.

And then I'm like, *Get over it, Dude*. I turn to my right and clap my arm around Ronnie's shoulders and with John between us we sing our lungs out. (I think John might've been a tad creeped out, but Ronnie's always been very touchy-feely.) I keep on splashing my sensible shoes with saltwater and howling away as the band plays.

*Blood brothers in the stormy night, with a vow to defend!  
No retreat, baby, no surrender!*

There's a lot of things life will take away from you as you go, and when you get blasted hard in time, it can be a shock to realize that you've lost. Your mind sparkles over the cracks as you move forward, and you compensate. You gain a ton of great stuff as you age, no doubt, but the new stuff sometimes pushes out the old, and the machinery cracks.

But when you've got friends to remind you of victories long past, it's almost like you still have the things you lost. Your friends safeguard your power for you, undiminished, in their memories, and you the same for them. It goes unspoken, it's understood. Old friends are a wellspring. There to shower you with tales of glory, and to rag your ass over all the times you failed.

When the song ended I looked to my left again, and the guy beside me had switched places with his girlfriend. Apparently he thought it would be less harmful for her to get splashed with emotion than him. She smiled at me, with a look that said, *I like guys who cry!* In another lifetime, sweetheart. I looked over at her wuss *Bruce keeps rockin', you'll end up soggy-eyed just like me*.

\*\*\*

Josephine Daisy (4) loves being home alone with Mommy this year, since Baby Bella's away at kindergarten. Josie, aka, The Josa-Beast, and Minna to play with, and Minna to watch anything more? Plus, each day carries a joyous bonus! When poor Bella slumps home from all-day kindergarten (That's too long for such little ones!) totally exhausted, Josie casually sidles up and describes all the cool stuff she did with Mommy while Belle is at school, which sends Belle into a fit.

Experts agree that Josephine spent in isolation in a small group can have a warping effect on norms and personalities. Josie, aka, The Josa-Beast, has developed a series of hand signals for Minna. This so she can conserve her voice for when she needs to yell, and so she doesn't have to turn her face away from what she's doing, which is either playing with the puppy, TV, or painting/drawing/coloring.

The other day I'm reading about the latest local Lexington quasi-governmental spending scandal on a Saturday morning and Josie's perched on her knees on a chair on the other side of the kitchen table, furiously scrubbing away at a piece of white paper with a purple marker. Silently, she balls up her free fist and jabs it straight up in the air.

I'm like, *Now what's she doing?*

Minna's standing in the kitchen and looking at sweet little Josie, and for some reason appears to be choking the life out of a dish towel. She hisses, "In a minute, Josie."

I drop my paper and adopt my default mode of bafflement. "What the heck are you two doing?" I say.

Josephine, not happy to be interrupted, slaps her pen onto the table and repeats the signal, punching the air angrily in my direction. "Daddy, when I do dis? It means more juice."

Ouch.

"I *ordered* more juice," Josie barks, in Minna's direction.

I glance at Minna and she nods, with a look like, *So glad you got to see that*.

I can totally relate. Sometimes aren't there just things in life you know you shouldn't put up with, but you do? You just say *bleep* it, let it go, and live to fight more pressing battles. The problem arises when an outsider sees the embarrassing thing. Sometimes that person has to be killed, in order to save face.

I wrench my newspaper in front of my face. (Bonus, the lingerie ad!) "I didn't see nothin', Boss," I say to Minna, "Nothin' at all."

Josie shoots me a stone-faced eyebrow, like, "*You want some 'a this?*"

\*\*\*

Little Belle keeps softly and successfully making her way in the world. (6 in December) She's shot up and got skinny since last year, and continues being her Momma's clone. Everyone says so. Family who knew Minna as a child get this look on their faces each time they see her. It's an admixture of subconscious pleasure at the overt propulsion of family genes, but there's a haunted aspect as well, like they've opened an attic trap-door and glimpsed a doe-eyed and shyly smiling ghost.

Bella thrives on attention, lives for affection, seeks interaction like oxygen. Unlike big sister Maddy, who was the center of the universe from birth and can therefore take it or leave it, little Bella's had to fight for every inch of spotlight she can get. So it's especially nice to see her come of social age and get her due. Kindergarten has been her coming out party. She's traded tea parties with imaginary friends for the real thing.

This year's Halloween party was the first year Belle had a guest list, and she was beside herself with excitement. And what was really sweet was Belle's little Asian friends who came bearing gifts. Her classmate Fumie walked in with her Mother and a bouquet of tiny roses and presented them to Belle in the front hallway. Naturally, Belle being Belle, she felt this was appropriate and normal, and accepted them with aplomb.

Then another Asian friend arrived with more flowers for Bella. It was really neat, and I had never seen such a thing. Afterward I remarked on the nice flowers and asked Belle, "Where's Fumie from?"

"She's from Japan," Belle said.

"How do you know that?" I asked.

"Because she speaks French," she replied matter of factly.

"Oh, okay. That clears that up," I said.

"We call her Foo-Foo," Belle continued.

"Hmm," I say, "Does she like that nickname?"

"Of course," Belle states.

"How do you know that?"

"Because she loves me. And I love her."

Sometimes it's tough to follow Belle's logical thread, but the emotional import is never in doubt. She sincerely loves all things, even her brother, except sometimes.

\*\*\*

Golden Girl Maddy (9) continues to lead the soft parade, serenely, but with whip-cracking discipline. Minna and I rarely need to say anything at dinner anymore, because Madeline pipes up and fills in for us. Irrelevancy is relaxing for me, but I think it irritates Mommy.

The other day Belle said something like, "Is crap a bad word?"

And before I can blurt, "Can we talk about non-excretory topics during dinner?", Maddy lunge in and says, "Crap means poop, Belle. But even though we're allowed to say poop-

-Just not at the dinner table," I feebly interject.

Maddy shoots me a glance like, *If I may continue?* and says, "We really aren't allowed to say crap."

"But you said they're the same thing," counters Mick.

"*Poop, poop, poopy!*" contributes Josie, with a noodle hanging out of her nose. (How does one get spaghetti sauce on one's forehead at the start of every single meal?)

"Enough!" says Minna, glaring balefully down at her *Morningstar Farms* Garden Veggie Burger soybean pattie substance. (Perhaps because it looks like a piece of p#@!.) (The Minna has done went vegetarian this year. Says her stomach couldn't take no more beefy deliciousness. I take comfort in the fact that it's not a philosophical thing. She has no problem sacrificing fish on the altar of her beloved sushi.) (I also love sushi, as long as it's battered and deep-fried. Or on a fishhook.) Everyone snaps to attention at Mommy's command.

But Maddy just can't leave it alone. She leans over to Mick and says softly, "Crap is poop. But you can't say crap, because it's a cussword. Like we're allowed to say *hush*, but you can't say *shut up*."

"And you can't say hate," Belle adds.

"Maddy!" Minna says, "I am the Mom. Please let me handle this."

Belle gets that funny little smile on her face and says, "Cwap is funny. Are we allowed to say that now?"

"*Poop!*" says Josie, a noodle hanging out of her ear, "*But!*"

\*\*\*

Another year draws to a close. We do our best and hope for the same. I humbly exhort you, in 2010, to *dive in*. If there's something you've wanted to tackle, do it. Time is short, and the fact is that time solves our problems for us, whether we like it or not.

Last night I'm slumped at the kitchen table reading my ACE Magazine after another brain-sizzling day at the office. I feel like a flank steak, which each member of my staff has been beating on with a wooden tenderizing hammer for ten hours. I just want silence and stillness. Then I feel a tug at my sleeve.

"Daddy, can you come downstairs and play wif me?" says Josie, looking like Cindy Lou Who. "You can get your play-clothes on first if you want. I'll wait."

And it's just the last thing I wanna do. My knees don't feel like playing *Follow the Bunny*, or *Daddy Rodeo*, or *Bug Family*, or whatever old-man-punishing game Josie and Belle might have dreamed up today. *Daddy, you will be a giant stink-bug. We will be beautiful butterflies.*

"Ahh, honey, I'm really kinda tired tonight," I say.

Then Belle sidles up and stands beside Josie, holding Jack, and they all three cock their head to the side at the exact same moment. "Please, Daddy," Belle says.

What the heck. I fold my paper, suck it up and say, "Only if we play *Bug Family*, and *only* if I get to be the giant stink-bug."

"Yay!" they both yell.

Because I realize that this is a "problem" that time will solve for me. Soon I won't be able to drag them kicking and screaming with me anywhere, much less have them begging me to play with them in the basement.

Do the stuff you need to do, and do it now. And try not to spend all your time at the beach on your knees, whining about how the shattered seashells are digging into your skin. Stand up and breathe deep. Consider the majesty of the far horizon.

I wish you all the best in 2010.