



Jenkins Christmas Letter 2008

Let's see, what happened of note in 2008?

Hmm...I guess I've never been that big on seeing the forest. I'm more into the trees. More into the interstitium of life. For example, when the guys around me are shouting angrily at the players on the football field about baffling concepts like "nickel package!" or "encroachment!", I'm like Ferdinand sitting under his cork tree, placidly staring platonically at the cheerleaders. *Except!* of course, when the lovely Minna has favored me with her presence, in which case I spend the entire game gazing lovingly into her eyes.

Newsflash: Here's something happened in 2008: The *World Financial System* evaporated and no longer exists.

Yawn. Is anybody else sick to death of hearing about it? I mean, I know it's very serious and all, and I know that soon we'll be using doughnut-shaped rocks or baby goats for legal tender. But really, what's the average person supposed to make of all this? Whose version should we believe? (Gee, is my house really worth eight dollars now?)

I myself personally have *bigger fish* to fry. Issues of broad magnitude. And excuse the %@#& out of me, but I am trying to gin up some Christmas Spirit here, okay? So I ain't so interested in current events, I'm here to talk about wife and kid events.

This morning I walked past Mick's (7 on the day after Christmas) bedroom and saw him scuttling about on the floor like an albino crab. (Dressed, as always, in boxers period. No shirt, pants, socks, shoes. Dressing "fancy" for the Flickster is putting on a T-shirt and shorts with no gaping holes, and a pair of thirty-nine cent flip-flops. In January.)

Mick's eyes darted frantically across the fetid carpet, looking panicked and malarial in the sickly yellow lamplight. (And by "carpet" I don't mean a woven floor-covering made in Dalton, Georgia. I mean an unbroken quilt of tens of thousands of tiny...*just*, I don't know, *things*. Items. Pieces...of *stuff*.)

To wit: Plastic army men; Lego blocks; tentacles from the Kraken; random Skittles and M&M's and fossilized Chee-Toes; hideously disfigured girl-toys stolen from Belle and Josie (Where do you reckon he got the brazing torch?); socks and underwear of dire cleanliness; the Kraken's body, sans tentacles; pizza crusts; what looks like the skull of a dog; and alfalfa (Yes, alfalfa, the flowering plant from the pea family used popularly

as a forage crop, and routinely kicked out of her cage and onto Mick's floor by Gladys the Guinea Pig—who's starting to smell)

I have no idea what color the actual *carpet* in the boy's room is, or if the floor may actually be gleaming hardwood.

"Whatcha lookin' for, Champ?" I query. (I admit it, I'm not attempting to help. I'm attempting to be entertained.)

Mick studies an unwrapped Starburst, pops it into his mouth, and without looking up mutters, "I can't find Jack Sparrow's arm."

Now do you see?

These are the "big questions" grappled with daily in the Jenkins house: *Who stole Johnny Depp's pirate arm?* (With 3 sisters to combat hourly, it's never a question of Mick having *lost* something, when one of the sirens more likely *stole* it.)

I glance at the built-in desk (which he never uses), and on its pristine surface stands a two-inch Captain Jack Sparrow, arms intact. I hold it up and say, "Look here, Mick! Captain Jack has both his arms!"

In the interim, Mick has violently wedged his head into the four-inch space between the bottom of his bunk bed and the floor, so it takes a minute for him to wrench it out and look up at me. He shakes his head sadly and says, "Dad, please. That's Jack Sparrow's *avatar*. He's not weal." (We're still working on the r's)

Acknowledging that (as usual) this is way over my head, I make my way creakily downstairs to get the newspaper and a hearty (not) bowl of Multi-Grain Cheerios. (Supposed to be good for you.)

On the front porch I inspect the newspaper, which has shrunk to about 6 sheets of newsprint because nobody reads it anymore, except bitter, aging cranks like...I unfold it to a banner headline that screams: "Christmas is Cancelled!" due to nobody can afford to buy anything.

Not really, but close. They're saying it's going to be grim for stores. I have no idea, but I did see a lady in the display window of a women's clothing boutique braiding a Hermes scarf into a noose the other day. Not sure what that was about.

Queen Bee Maddy continues to thrive. At 8 she's a born leader, at home and in her third grade class at Rosa Parks Elementary. But there's leadership and then there's politics, and when it comes to the latter, Maddy could definitely use a Carville or a

Matalin. She recently ran for President of her class against our good former friend Cam Maloney and was cruelly trounced.

So much for childhood invincibility. (I keep thinking about that classic line from Bender, the drunken robot sidekick in the bizarro long-ago-wrongfully-cancelled Fox cartoon sci-fi series *Futurama*, when he says in response to the Professor discouraging the erstwhile hero Fry from pursuing his ambition: “Aww, leave him alone! He’s got his own dreams that won’t come true!”)

I have taken the high road, and counseled Maddy to keep a stiff upper lip and move on with her life. But in the days since the election, certain things have come to light. Certain...irregularities. I have now learned that said Class-President-Elect Maloney allegedly brought fresh-baked cookies to school on election-day morning, upon which said cookies was emblazoned his campaign slogan.

How is the above different from the standard Magoffin County half-pint of bourbon with a five dollar bill rubber-banded around it? And this is not the only item of wrongdoing my investigator has dug up, far from it. Minna relates that she has learned in a conversation with our good former friend Sarah Maloney that her Son the candidate allegedly provided *extra cookies* to undecided voters, in the final minutes before polls closed.

This will not stand. And it has nothing to do with my daughter being deprived of the esteem-elevating office to which she is entitled. Rather, this goes to the very rotting fabric of our democracy. (And it most certainly has nothing to do with my first run for political office, when all my hopes and dreams were crushed under the jack-booted heels of our good former friend Lee Ellen Martin (the former Marcum) when she effortlessly destroyed me in a run for Sixth Grade Class President at Glendover Elementary those many years ago.)

Rank politics aside, little Maddy is a people magnet of the first magnitude. Sometimes I’ll watch her from across a crowded room, (usually a classroom, while sitting in a chair that positions my knees beside my ears) surrounded by her friends, chattering their little-girl talk, and she just seems to glow from the inside. The other girls inevitably press in. They want to touch her arm, to be in her orbit, to be washed in the sunshine of her favor.

Yet with Maddy there’s a certain remove. You can see it in her eyes, but only if you know her well. So much, and then no further. She maintains a distance, while scanning the room for any unmet needs. She searches for unhappiness so that she can do battle with it.

Despite my conviction that she is a happy child, (How can a parent possibly believe otherwise?) there is an otherness about her, a melancholy that I know well, and it pains my heart. She is an exceptional soul, a life-force of tremendous value and potential. Dangerously, I believe she intuits this and is therefore yoked by it. For my part, I intuit

that she is my finest creation--my signal achievement--and I desire nothing more than to keep her heart unscarred for as long as I am able.

Little Bella keeps chugging along, her plump legs stippled with bruises; arms scalloped with bite marks (Yes, courtesy of *Baby Gorgon*, infra). The thing is, Belle bumps into stuff. She falls down for no reason. She gets her feelings hurt when there's no one else in the room. She is a decidedly soft-focus girl in a hard-edged world.

In Belle's Utopia (She lives there, she only helicopters back to reality for meals and baths) every room is upholstered in purple and pink fun-fur, and every table groans with cupcakes and candy and big jugs of apple juice. (And pallets-full of peanut butter and chocolate-flavored "WeeFee Puffs" cereal.)

Belle marches to the beat of her own symphony orchestra. She often narrates aloud her activities of daily living. Her very own Boswell, if you will.

She emanates an air of portent, and is oft dismissive, with a magisterial bent. I think, at bottom, she's concerned with her legacy and ensuring its proper recordation.

The other day she sidles up to me as I'm reading the paper after dinner and says, "Daddy, did you know that the Moon follows me?"

"Really?" I say. "You and only you?"

She nods, smiling shyly.

"Wow."

"Wanna see?" she chirps, already skipping toward the front door. It wasn't really a question.

Daylight Depression Time has made it pitch-black-dark by 5:15, so I guess it's plenty night enough for Moon watching. I step onto the porch as Belle hops over the ivy border beside the front walk. I don't even flinch as her foot catches a tendril, she pitches forward and face-plants into the frosty grass. Because it happens every time.

"Darn it!" she says, picking herself up, brushing herself off. "I'm okay."

"I know, Bella."

"Now. Daddy, do you see the Moon?" She points up through the bony branches of our newly bare Tulip Poplar.

"There it is. Big as life."

“Now watch,” she says, and takes off at a trot across the yard. At the far corner, she turns back, looks up, and reconnoiters. Then she looks at me, nodding, one eyebrow cocked. “See?”

“Amazing,” I say.

“It follows me. Wherever I go.’

Hey, I’m not telling her any different. She’s my needy little second-girl-child teddy bear, and as far as I’m concerned, if she *needs more*, then she’s going to *get more*, at least while I’m around.

“C’mere, Princess,” I say. She flashes that 1,000-watt grin and sprints toward me, stumbles, falls, face-plants into the grass, gets up, runs again and crashes headlong into my arms. I plant a big kiss on her cold cheek and sit her on my knee, arms around her waist.

We sit there for a little while, not saying anything, watching our breath turn to fog. She leans back and looks up at me, conspiratorially.

“Daddy, out of all your kids, you love me the most, don’t you?”

I just smile down at her and blow a stream of breath at her.

She beams back at me and nods. Then she looks up at her Moon. “I knew you did.”

At the age of 4 years and just barely shy of 5, Annabel Lee (She was born *many and many a year ago, in a kingdom by the sea*) is perched within that narrow happy aperture of time in which one has attained cognition, but avoided adulteration. Her eyes as mechanical tools have focused, yet she remains blind to darkness.

When I “studied” in London in the summer of 1986, (at the London School of Economics, no less, the alma mater of Mick Jagger. Although he quickly dropped out, therefore eliminating any chance he may have had for success.) my soccer teammate Karl Stimmel and I would run in Regent’s Park every afternoon to keep in shape. There was an ancient Zoo in one corner of the vast greenspace, and almost everyday we would find ourselves running a gauntlet of English school moppets clad in peacoats and shiny leather shoes. And since *no one* in England at that time would have considered running unless being chased by Jack the Ripper, we were instantly identifiable as Yanks. And *every time* we would jog by a clot of the chipper little ruddy-faced buggers, they would smile broadly to each other and as if on cue, begin *yelling* the theme music to *Rocky*: Da DA, da da da, da da DA, da da da! It got to where Karl and I would shadow-box as we ran by them, which of course would send them into paroxysms of glee.

Anyway, (There was a point, however metaphorically tangential, or vice versa, it might be.) when we got back to the flat after our run every day, we used a tissue to wipe away a black ring of soot from around each nostril, so thick was the coal-fired air. And I think the same sort of thing happens to us and to children, as the soot of our world over time settles onto our eyes and our hearts.

Even at the tender age of 8, it's clear that Maddy has had the thinnest layer of gauze laid over her eyes, and it prevents her from seeing the world in the way Belle still can. And I am so happy that for this brief crystalline moment as a 5 year old girl, Belle sees the world with a clarity and purity unavailable to us. She sees things as she wants them to be: Clear and bright and without limit.

And I'll be damned if I'm telling her any different.

Hemingway said that in Africa a thing is true at first light and a lie by noon. And so it is on the Savannah. 2205 *Savannah Lane*, to be precise. At first light Baby Josephine is as sweet as a 3 year old can be, but by lunchtime she's Napoleon, leading her army across the snow-covered Alps on a mule.

There is no end to the devastationary power of this child. Just last evening, Minna was hectoring into letting the kids have a Free-Zee Pop after dinner. (Bad idea, I offered silently. I personally believe that Free-Zee Pops should be illegal from October through April.) Josie, of course, chose red: A full 12 inches of frosty high fructose corn syrup, blended with carmine for permanent staining power. I cut the thing open with the Fiskars and off she padded, all barefoot and bad attitude.

Five minutes later I'm sitting at the kitchen table assisting Mick in the construction of a "shadow box" for his school project. (He ain't allowed to use he hot lava gun just yet. But maybe I should let him try, since the last time I used it I burned myself and him fairly badly.) The students in Mrs. Andry's first grade class (I think there are also second-graders in the same room, which is still so frickin' weird to me and I'm pretty sure wrong.) had to choose a Native American tribe and do a project on it, no more specific than that. They could choose the Chinook and make a miniature totem pole, for example, or the Seminole and construct a tiny Everglades Bingo Parlour.

At any rate, I went upstairs to chew another 7 aspirin to try to barely dull the edge of the sinus-death-headache that I had. (After gobbling the tablets, I paused to clip off a hangnail at my bathroom sink and I nicked my cuticle, and *goodness*, but I almost filled up that sink before I got the tourniquet cranked down!) When I returned to the kitchen table, Mick had assembled a vast array of tiny plastic people in his cardboard diorama box.

But something didn't feel right. "Uhh, what's going on here, little buddy?"

Mick shrugged and pointed to a fierce-looking Indian brave on horseback. “This is Cwazy Horse.”

A shiver ran down my spine. “That’s funny. The cowboys look like they’ve all fallen down, Son.”

“And this is Sitting Bull,” he said, pointing to a tiny Indian in a buffalo head-dress.

“Why are all the cowboys lying down, Mick?”

“They’re dead,” he said. He pointed to a supine cowboy with a green plastic cactus lying across his face. “This is Custer.”

I think I’m going to look up Mr. and Mrs. Dahmer and take them to lunch. See how things have gone for them.

Then I look around and see Princess Thunderbrow (Josie) looking extremely displeased and holding an empty plastic Free-Zee Pop sleeve.

“What’s wrong, Hoser?”

“It keeps being gone!” she bellowed. Then she turned and pointed to the trail of red droplets that led through every room in the house, and I realized that she had been holding the open end of the container down instead of up.

This child, this child, I cried! I’ve become convinced she is the illegitimate love spawn of Heinrich Himmler and Lizzie Borden. And then had Stalin for her first grade teacher and Pol Pot was her peewee soccer coach.

She’s mean and hickory tough. Think I’m kidding? She eats thumbtacks for breakfast with a side of fresh-squeezed chicken blood.

And please do not be deceived by the apple-cheeked angel you think you’re seeing in photos. Try this: Hold one of those group photos up to a mirror. Josie doesn’t show up, does she? (I was confused recently when I found a photo of her smiling sweetly. But I looked more closely and discerned that her eyes were focused on a Yellow Jacket preparing to sting sister Belle in the temple.)

I give my baby half my money at the general store. I said, now buy a few groceries and don’t spend no more. She paid ten dollars for a ten-cent hat, and got some store-bought catfood for her mean-eyed cat.*

*Cribbed and reprinted with appreciation (but without permission) from the great Johnny Cash, with whom I share a love for spendthrift women. But that's not really true. (Minna doesn't have a cat.) It's just that...I've already gone too far, haven't I? Oh well, I guess I'm pot-committed.

Anyone close to the situation knows that the Minna-ster is an excellent manager of the house and the kids and the home economy. She just gets *excited* sometimes, which manifests itself in a \$49.95 foam rubber rat with red jeweled eyes for Halloween. To compliment the \$59.95 foam rubber anaconda from last year, [Or was that the \$49.95 (50% off!) anatomically-correct severed leg?]

"The rat needed something to gnaw on," Minna helpfully explained. (How much, I wonder, is a foam rubber severed leg worth on November 1st?)

But really, we hardly ever argue about money. I give her all I have, and she doesn't hit me anymore. She also seems becalmed since I obtained a massive new life insurance policy this past summer. (*From AIG!* I'm not kidding. They say they're still paying claims, but if I die and I get stiffed, I'm gonna haunt the crap out of them.)

It was really strange, right around the time I got the new policy, Minna developed a newfound appetite for extreme sports! Last Saturday morning I asked her, as usual, what I wanted to do that weekend, and she piped up with, "How about *skydiving*?" Which wouldn't have set off any alarm bells, except that the previous weekend she suggested, apropos of nothing, that I *try my hand at building an airplane from a kit!*

Hmm...she knows I'm not handy. Then I got plain worried when we were out walking downtown the other evening and she said, "Wouldn't it be funny if you ran up and kicked that pitbull as hard as you can in the ribs?"

Nana and Pop Jenkins celebrated their 50th wedding anniversary this year in grand style, with all 4 kids and spouses and 11 grandkids in attendance. Sally did an awesome job putting together a 20-minute slideshow of about a million photos set to our childhood classic songs. (*Walk the Line; El Paso; Country Roads;* and of course, The King warbling *Don't Be Cruel*) And after watching the DVD again last night I have to give Pop a shout-out for his jaw-dropping success at perpetuating his genes, as evidenced in the faces of his progeny.

Our friend and long-time babysitter Megan (Who's engaged to be married to Bob! *Congrats, MayMay!* I never thought I'd see the...Hmm. I never thought I'd be so *happy* for you!) sat and watched the slideshow DVD with Minna and me (And Josie, the little rodent won't stay in bed) after we got home from a tasty horse ovary of Buffalo Fried Shrimp and draft Bud Light at Lynagh's Shamrock while watching UK not really dominate that perennial hoops power, Oachita Baptist College.

About two-thirds of the way through the slideshow, Megan said, “They *all* look like Dr. J.”

I called Dad after the game to laugh about how Minna pronounced Oachita as OO-Cheeta. After all, any self-respecting native of the red-dirt and pine-forest paradise that is South Arkansas knows that it’s pronounced: Wash-it-Taw. I mean, *hello?*

Dad pointed out that he had returned a punt 80 yards for a touchdown against Oachita Baptist College on behalf of the mighty Hendrix College in Conway, Arkansas back in the day.

Way back. Then again, ain’t none of us getting any younger, baby. And that’s where I’m gonna wrap it up for this edition of the ever-expanding Jenkins Christmas Letter, 2008 Style.

Everybody be good/Do good/Help a brother out. You know, the usual.