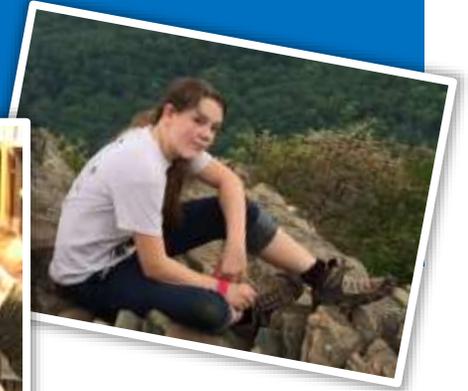


THE FAMLET

MONTHLY



Dear Family,

I have a work colleague who we occasionally refer to as “Goose” because he was an F-14 Radar Intercept Officer in the 1980s. He graduated from Annapolis in 1982 and from TOPGUN in '86, which makes him the right age to have been in the movie, but he wasn't. He seldom talks about his previous life in the Navy, but he has likened the feeling of riding next to a child who is learning how to drive to the feeling of “landing on an aircraft carrier in the dark.” I will likely never know what that second thing feels like, but it sounds unsettling, and having gone through the first thing with multiple children, the comparison seems apt to me.

More than five years have passed since we went through this ordeal with Hannah, and Lucy has expressed no interest in driving, and so we were a little out of practice when Sophie turned 15 years and 9 months old (the minimum age for obtaining a learner's permit in Maryland) earlier this month and passed the requisite “knowledge test.” Sophie's meticulous preparation for the written test mirrored her approach to many things and included copious note-taking in the margins of her Maryland Driver's Manual. (I got in trouble for making fun of her for this.)

After about 90 minutes of practice driving our two older cars (a 2004 Sienna and a 2005 Avalon) around a few mostly empty parking lots and quiet roads, one of Sophie's parents thought it a good idea to let her try to drive the 2016 Highlander we had purchased three days earlier. (Yes, we now own three Toyotas. As discussed



Magic Kingdom — 23 January

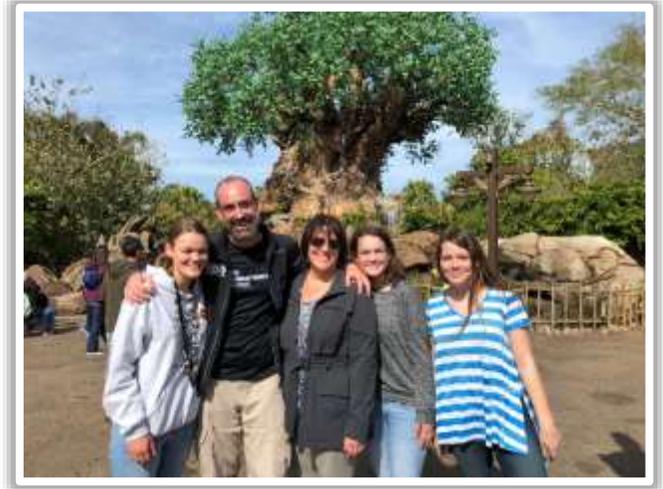
below, we are also fairly habitual when it comes to vacations.) Predictably, Sophie promptly crashed our new car into an old Lexus parked on a corner of our narrow street.

Sophie objects to my use of the verb *crashed* in this context. She prefers *tapped* or *bumped*. Crystal's verb—*sideswiped*—is probably most accurate. In hindsight, given the lack of significant damage, the ensuing conversation with USAA probably did not need to happen. Sophie tried a variety of euphemisms with the very friendly insurance adjuster and was sad to learn that, whatever you want to call it, it still goes down in the books as a *collision*. I'm not sure whether there's a section in Sophie's personal annotated copy of the Maryland Driver's Manual about not colliding with other cars or if that was covered on the test, but she knows not to do that now.

Sophie's conversation with USAA reminded me of a story I was told many years ago about a relative (whom I will not name because it's secondhand and she may read this) who allegedly tried to persuade the insurance company not to increase her premium by assuring them that she would not be getting any more speeding tickets because she now had a radar detector.

Sophie logged a few driving hours during our triennial January trip to Orlando last week. She did well and managed not to hit anything. My January letters from 2015, 2012, 2009, and 2006 describing this trip demonstrate that we are nothing if not predictable. The level of detail varies, but in each letter I apparently felt it was important to include the driving distance from here to there. What's funny is I report a different distance every year. In [2015](#) I described it as an "863-mile drive to Orlando." In [2012](#) I wrote it was 880 miles. In [2009](#) it was 870 miles. And in [2006](#), 875 miles. However far it is, it begins very early in the morning and takes all day.

As usual, we did all our driving on Sundays. This year we left home early enough to catch a 10:00 a.m. sacrament meeting in Florence, South Carolina, and left Orlando early enough to catch a 9:00 a.m. sacrament meeting in Savannah, Georgia. Both wards greeted us with the same cheery optimism our ward showers on new families who show up unexpectedly. I hated telling people we weren't there to stay because I know how disappointing it is when people visiting our ward say it to me. Part of me wishes we could walk in



Above: Disney's Animal Kingdom — 24 Jan

Below: With Chewbacca—23 Jan



with a sign to save everyone the trouble of being nice to us: “Hi, we’re the Willises, from Maryland. Don’t mind us—we’re just passing through. Sorry.” It seems like it would be easier that way.

We were joined in Orlando by Crystal’s three delightful step-sisters and their families. Grandma and Grandpa Kent came too and provided the lodging, as they always do. We spent one day at each of the four Disney parks and two days hopping back and forth between to the two Universal Parks (mostly doing/eating Harry Potter stuff). It’s a little embarrassing to admit that I enjoy all this as much as I do, but what can I tell you? We have a good time there. Everyone has outgrown wanting to meet princesses, and so that’s about 5 hours of line-standing we can skip now. We’re all thoroughly exhausted, but we’re glad we went and we’ll probably do it again.

This was our first Florida trip without Hannah, who couldn’t reasonably play hooky from the nursing program for a week. We missed her.

She and JT began the month at our place, attending a New Year’s Eve pad Thai cook-off between Rick Kemper and me. JT joined most of the rest of those present in judging Rick’s pad Thai superior to mine. So he would appear to have the whole not-a-sycophant thing going for him.

We are a month closer to the May 4th wedding and are really no closer to having anything planned. I suspect the next three months are going to elapse faster than we are ready for them to. Part of Hannah’s indecision about the reception is doubtless my fault. I gave her a wedding budget (which I think was smart) and subsequently told her that she could keep whatever part of the budget was not spent (which I thought was smart at the time but, in hindsight, may not have been).

According to [the internet](#), the average cost of a wedding in the United States crept above \$35,000 in 2016 (and, not surprisingly, somewhat higher than that where we live). The budget I quoted Hannah, after consulting with my friend and former father-of-bride Rick Kemper, while only a fraction of the internet’s figure, still looks pretty good to a couple of poor college students and has compelled them to think coldly and rationally about something that can be reasonably expected to have at least some modicum of irrational extravagance. Do we really *need* flowers? Do we really *need* a wedding cake? Do we need to serve



Epcot hats—27 Jan



food? Can't we just dump a bunch of ice cream sandwiches on a big table and call it good?

Without meaning to, what I've really done is incentivize them to [elope](#). Don't get me wrong—I hate wedding receptions as much as the next guy, but that was not really the intent. The obvious solution is to set a budget floor to complement the ceiling, but I don't really know where to set it. Sorry, Hannah. I had to learn on someone, and you came first.

On average, the Philadelphia Eagles advance to the Super Bowl once every 17.3 years. (A mortgage industry analyst [noted](#) an uptick in 30-year cash-out refinancings in the Philadelphia area the last time the Eagles made the Super Bowl and mused about the wisdom of financing a very short-lived asset—a trip to the Super Bowl—with such a long-term liability secured by one's primary residence. The analyst wryly suggests that, given the Eagles' pattern of success, a 15-year mortgage would be more appropriate.)

Their first time was in 1981 when the Eagles went into the game as heavy favorites against the Oakland Raiders. I was about to turn 9 and did not know where Oakland was. My friend and future brother-in-law Rick Kent (he was called "Ricky" then) had recently moved into our South Jersey ward from the Bay Area and told me that Oakland was in California. I did not believe him. I had never been to California and imagined it to be beautiful. That a collection of dirtbags as unsightly as the Raiders could hail from there seemed incongruous to me, but Ricky insisted it was so, and I was pretty sure he was wrong until some grown-up (Dad, I think) set me straight. The Raiders won the game decisively and I have despised them ever since.

Twenty-four years would pass before the Eagles returned to the Super Bowl (which they lost to the favored New England Patriots—let's not get started on how I feel about the Patriots). By then I was several years into writing the Famlet Monthly. Perusing [this letter from January 2005](#) reminded me that the last time the Eagles were in the Super Bowl, I was excited enough to write about it and:

- I had never taken my family to Florida



Rick Kemper and Me—New Year's Eve Pad Thai Throwdown

- Mom and I were both seminary teachers—she in New Jersey and I here. I wrote, *"I like teaching...I think I'm much better at it than I would be at some of the more high-profile church jobs."* I've had ample opportunity to test that hypothesis during the past 13 years. My viewpoint has not changed.
- My brothers and I watched the game in my basement on an old-school, 27-inch "tube" TV. We debated upgrading for the game, but apparently none of us felt rich enough to take the plunge. The enormous, flat panel screens that nowadays basically function as wallpaper in even the humblest dwellings were pretty expensive back then.
- Sophie (then age 2) was calling me by my first name. She doesn't anymore, but Grace (now age 12) sometimes does.
- Crystal, notwithstanding being seven months pregnant with Grace, was a faster swimmer than I. Sadly for her, this is no longer the case.

Anyway, this team has been breaking my heart for nearly 40 years, and I have no reason to expect anything different this time. But, hey, I just spent a week at the place "Where Dreams Come True." Maybe this is the year.

May it be yours, too (unless you're a Pats fan).