

The only thing Lucy likes less than being forced to clean her bedroom is being forced to allow someone else (i.e., her mother) to do it for her. This is because Lucy doesn't enjoy being asked to explain the various little surprises that invariably turn up. The surprises are usually evidence of pilfered foodstuffs: lollipop sticks stuck to the rug under her bed, small piles of candy wrappers, half-empty soda cans, etc. These findings have led to numerous home evening lessons on honesty and a padlocked trunk in which Crystal now stores the girls' favorite treats. However, this month's discovery that Lucy had been using her bedroom to hoard dishwasher detergent tablets (including some with bites taken out of them) yielded one of the year's greatest Lucy-isms. Upon being asked to explain how the tablets came to be in her bedroom, Lucy fretfully replied, "It's like trying to explain what 'if' means. There are some things you just can't explain."

Here are a couple of other gems from our favorite 8-year-old this month:

- "Santa Claus is a fraud. He says he makes the toys; but really he just buys them at Target."
- "Eggnog? That doesn't sound good."

This from the same mind that, upon discovering that she didn't have enough of a certain kind of wrapping paper to cover an entire gift, resolved upon making enough color photocopies of the paper to fill in the gaps. I'd been wondering why I'd been having to change ink cartridges so often. I suppose there are worse things.

Overall, the Christmas season has been nice. I got to watch Hannah sing with her middle school chorus at Union Station (on my way to the airport for a business trip to Atlanta — Sophie refers to these as "daddy's field trips"). The girls have been mostly civil to one another and have seemed genuinely excited at the prospect of giving gifts to one another. They even caroled without much of a fuss, first with their grandparents in their neighborhood, then with us in ours. But in the aftermath of it all, standing in the midst of the countless new American Girl boxes scattered throughout the house, part of me is happy it's over. There are just too many things that annoy me.

Take the federally mandated annual Christmas card with a cute picture of the kids on the front. As if I don't already have enough going on. I used to get worked up about what I was going to put in the "annual update." Then, a couple of years ago, I just stopped writing one. I stopped writing it at about the same time I realized that I'd stopped reading most of them. (Except yours. I read yours. I promise.) But really, is there anything more tedious to read than a solid page of 8-point font, documenting every excruciating detail of every family member's mundane activi-

ties and dubious accomplishments during the past year?

*Excuse me, Tim, but don't you write a letter fitting that description pretty much every month?*

No. I use 11-point font. (Okay, sometimes 10.)

If you're reading this, chances are you got our Christmas card, and you might have noticed that the photograph of the four girls (sitting on a butterfly bench at [Brookside Gardens](#)) is off-center. This annoyed me a great deal, but what was more frustrating was that that photo was—by far—the best picture we have of the four girls from the past six months. I have no idea how other families find one where all the kids are smiling, have their eyes open, look adorable, etc. AND is centered. So I've officially given up. Our girls may not be as photogenic as yours, but they're still beautiful.

And if I see another commercial in which an impossibly beautiful man gives his Botoxed wife either a) a Lexus, or b) expensive jewelry for Christmas, I'm going to throw the remote through the screen. (This will give me the excuse I need to buy a new 62-inch LCD like Grant's.)

Speaking of excuses to buy new expensive stuff, this Christmas season saw the untimely destruction of our inexpensive camera, which Grace got her hands on and air-hockeyed across the kitchen counter. The camera would have glided more easily if we'd had expensive granite countertops like everyone else, but even our cheap Formica did not provide adequate friction to stop the camera before it reached the edge and tumbled to its demise against the ceramic tile floor. The upshot of this is that we now have an expensive Canon SLR. (Imagine what Grace can do with that!) I know exactly nothing about photography, but Crystal wants to get into it, and I'm really excited to see what she produces when she summons the courage to use something other than the "Full Auto" setting.

On a happier note, the Christmas season also saw me perform my first wedding. It went nicely. I'm not sure what it says that I conducted a half-dozen funerals before getting to do my first wedding. But they're a really nice couple and I hope they make it. I have a pretty good track record with funerals—all those people are still dead—so I have every reason to expect that this marriage will last.

We closed out the holiday with a day-after-Christmas jaunt to [Mount Vernon](#). It was cold and rainy, but not crowded, and they were doling out hot cider and gingerbread and the mansion tour included a rare peek at the third floor; so it might have been worth it. Hannah and Lucy loved it; Sophie endured it; and Grace hated it—but only set off the alarm once. We'll try again in a couple of years.

Have a nice month.



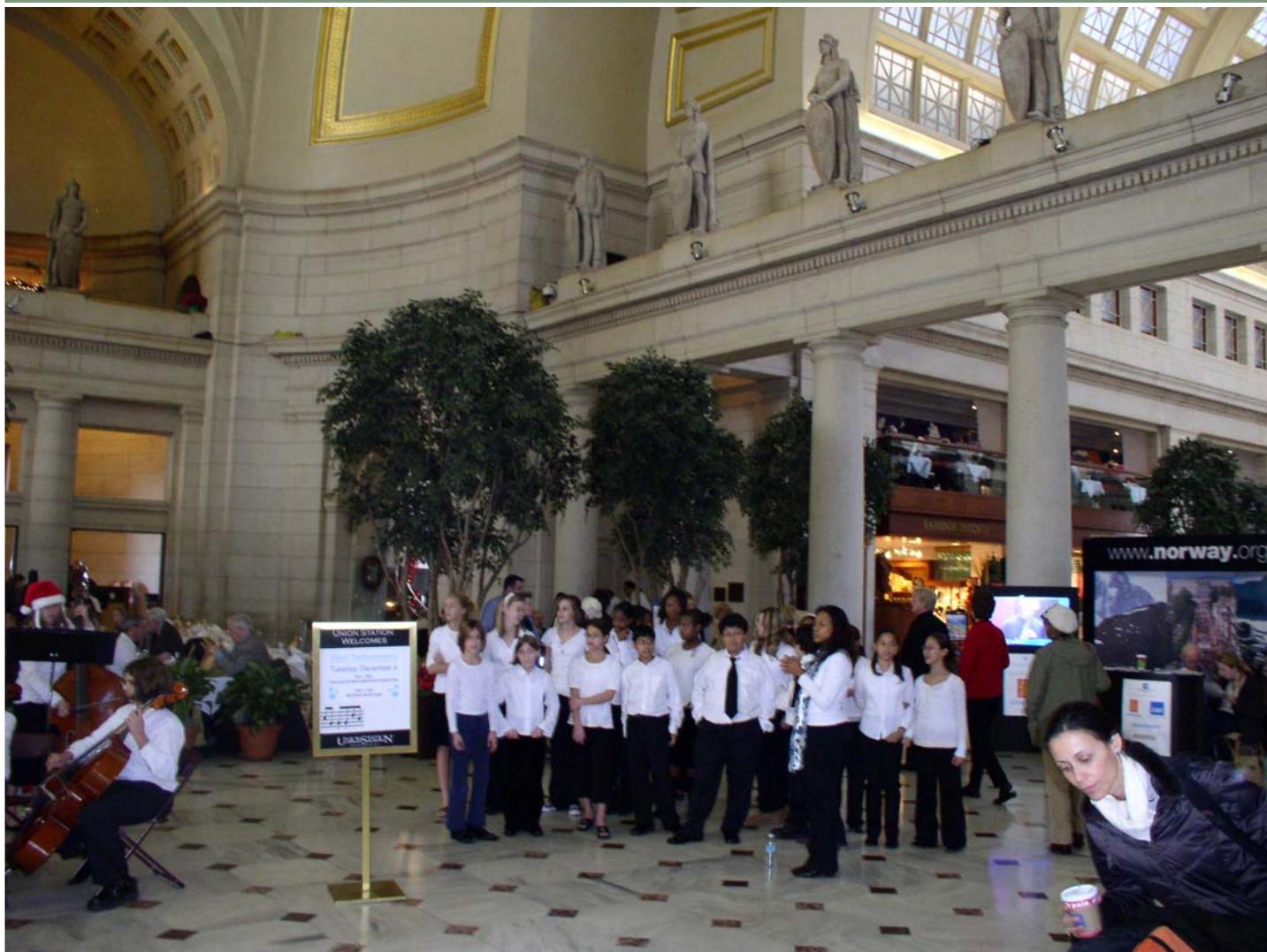
Sophie and Santa



Lucy at Mount Vernon on the day after Christmas. It was raining and Lucy's hood was up, obscuring her face. So I've expertly Photoshopped in another head-shot. (But I don't think anyone could tell.)



Grace: Excited about Christmas



Hannah's Middle School Chorus performing at Union Station