

Dearest friend,

Well now. I dare say I generally take a humorist approach to the annual Christmas Letter, and find that while funny, little tends to be true. Which has always been my intent.

But this year? *This year?* This year I became a grandfather. So that changes things. Let's start there. I'll say this, as a start. All names are fictional, but everything else in this letter is the God's-honest truth.

On Christmas Day of last year, my daughter and son-in-law gave me a present, a cube-shaped box wrapped in red Santa Claus paper. I opened it. A mug. A coffee mug. My eyes laser-focused on the words stenciled across its face. "World's Greatest Grandpa On The South Side."

Took me a second. And yeah, I cried when I finally got it. My wife got a similar mug. She cried, too. She screamed first.

Middle of July? A beautiful baby girl came to us. Let's call her Grace. I held her. With a soft voice, I serenaded her with Springsteen's *Born To Run*. Because, yeah, she's gonna be a runner, just like Grandpa, I'll tell you that right now. And a Springsteen fan. I'll make sure of it.

She joins a big Irish family. Yeah, Grace, you're one of us now. All forty-five of us.

There's more. My oldest son. Let's call him- let's see- let's call him Ryan. Ryan got engaged to his girlfriend of seven years. An awesome young woman I'm going to call Pauline. It's going to be a big Irish wedding on top of a mountain in Lake Tahoe. There's one chink in the armor on this one. I'm afraid of heights. So Dad, dashingly handsome in a hand-tailored tuxedo, will be roped and tethered to the ground for safety reasons. Then we'll all ski down the mountain side for refreshments. (Last sentence? Not happening.)

Gosh, so much great stuff. My youngest daughter, (let's call her Betsy,) gave me the trip of a lifetime. She's a few years younger than her nearest of three siblings, so for a lot of years, it was just me and her. And one of our "things" was Disneyworld. At least a couple of times, Betsy and I would head down to Disneyworld, she and I on our own, careening down Splash Mountain and soaring through, well, Soaring.

So last year, I get another surprise Christmas present. C'mon, take a guess. What's that? You guessed an all-expense paid trip to Disneyworld with her and her boyfriend? Congratulations!!! You guessed right!!!

Wow, what a blast we had. Ever been down Splash Mountain in January? I have!!! Three times. Let's just say the water is... Brisk. Three days of Disney fun. Hit every park. Fireworks in January *ROCKS!!!*

My second son? Life is righteous with him as well. He and his husband live a block away from my daughter, so he's thrilled to be the on-call babysitter for little Grace.

Sadly, we lost our dog, Sadie, to cancer this year. She's off into the skies now. But you know what? She gave us fourteen years of unqualified love. Can you ask for anything more? She was a wonderful dog.

And me? I've often said my life of chronic pain is a blessing, and I continue to believe that. I've been blessed with the joy of new friends and new paths and journeys. This year I published about four great short stories, with one to go this year, and two more that will hit in January. I've been able to get up on stage for some fun storytelling. Do you remember I'm a girls track and field coach? Of course you do!!! This year we sent three distance running events downstate to the Illinois State Track & Field Championships. A school record!!! I'll never forget these great girls and the work ethic they put in. I love them all. They all had PHD's. Poor, Hungry, and Driven.

Honestly? I think I'm the luckiest guy on the earth.

The problem with telling the truth is that there's so much to tell. But I think I've hit some of the highlights. I'd be sending a book if I scribed everything that happened this year. So I'll end with a poem.

I'm not much of a poet. Short stories are my thing. But I gave it a shot just for the heck of it. I hope you enjoy.

*Snowy nights and Christmas lights,
Christmas sweaters worn once a year,
A story for each,
And that makes Christmas.*

*The kids see Santa Claus
I believe, too.
Red suit, white beard, black boots, and a smile.
And that makes Christmas.*

Merry Christmas and Happy New Year!!!

Kris Kringle