

NATALIE: Every time you snort, do you kill a brain cell?

KRISTOFER: My head is too big to fit in the sewer.

LYDIA CHARLOTTE: I feel my heart beating in my butt!

YE OLDE XXVTH BRENDELGRAM

So yeah, we've been doing **Brendelgrams for XXV years.** That's 25 for you non-Romans — or "twenty-five" for David G. Brown and other readers of *The New Yorker*.

We began producing Brendelgrams in 1987, the year of President Reagan's prostate surgery. Gas was 89¢, and nobody had ever heard of a Lexus. Nobody had ever heard of crack cocaine, either, or the Hubble telescope or *When Harry Met Sally*. Not to mention Doppler radar and high-def TV and that little thing called the World Wide Web.

If we had known crack was coming, we might not have bothered starting the Brendelgram tradition, which has tragically addicted so many.

If we'd had a clue that Doppler was on its way, grievously intensifying Kristina's weather-watching fixation, we would never have taken on an annual Christmas newsletter obligation — getting her to focus on producing the Brendelgram has been incredibly difficult, especially since we moved to the East Coast, with its wonderful array of hurricanes, floods, earthquakes, all of which you can watch online like TV shows. And Kristina does. We are unlikely to get dinner if there's a historic low-pressure zone forming over the southern Atlantic. Hurricane Sandy was a terrible tragedy for millions, and we Brendels were forced to scrounge for days.

But in spite of mounting Brendelgram-related difficulties, we have soldiered on. We realized long ago that there was no more relying on Natalie and Kristofer to accidentally say cute things we could fill a page with....

- Baby Natalie referring to her little brother Kristofer as "Issue" ... later "Kissater" ... and then "Kittafer."
- Kristofer as a tiny little guy, unable to say the letter S, "advising us at breakfast time to "Tick a Pop-Tart in the toat-ter."

"When we go fimmin'," Kristofer used to say, "I wear my fimtoot!" He was unable to play, he reported at one point, because, as he put it, "One of my noses is running."

Even as a very young child, Natalie was in a hurry: "Dad, can you get on the freeway? I don't want to waste all my time in the country."

And curious. Anticipating a new pair of pet mice mating: "I hope I'm here for that happy day."

When Kristofer refused to marry her: "Why, because I'm black?" No, he explained, because brothers and sisters can't marry. Her retort: "I think we could get away with it."

Kristofer was big into piano lessons — for a while. When we asked him if he if he wanted to quit piano lessons: "Yes, and stop going to school." Kris was always pragmatic. On not being allowed to wear shorts to the theatre: "Why? Is it cold or something?"

When the big kids ceased producing cheap material for us, God saved the Brendelgram by bringing a new baby into the family. Lydia Charlotte was soon saying accidentally clever things of her own. Who can ever forget her as a first-grader: "Here, let me massage your thorax" ... or the classic: "Something smells like dope."

"I'm going to marry Johnnie. I'm just in love with him. Do you know Matthew's number?"

"My dad is such a crackhead. He cracks me up all the time."

"I love you with all half of my heart — you, and you."

Only this year have we finally come to a real Brendelgram crisis point. Lydia Charlotte, after producing such gems as "Marilyn Monroe has really large what are they called?" and "I've thrown up in 3 different colors," this year failed to produce.

She suddenly realized that Dad was writing down all her funniest stuff, saving it in a file and regurgitating it in December for the Brendelgram, and it

took her very little time to identify what had been happening as outrageous exploitation.

She borrowed Mom's iPhone to contact the Justice Dept., and reported us for violation of federal child labor laws. My trial is scheduled to begin in March.

Even more terrifying than the prospect of facing "a jury of my peers" are our friends who have assured us that they're eagerly awaiting the Brendelgram for — and *only* for — the run-down of Lydia Charlotte's witticisms. Our beloved Joey Ciaramitaro, at Capt. Joe's in Gloucester, stopped us before we left the dock the last time we bought lobsters from him.

"Just sayin'," he said, fixing us with a stern sailor's eye, "I can't wait to see what Lydia Charlotte says this year in the Brendelgram."

Then he grabbed Doug's shoulders. "No pressure," he grunted, turning Doug loose with something like a shove.

Only problem is, with Lydia Charlotte guarding her words like an intellectual-property lawyer this entire year — "That's not going in the Brendelgram, is it?" — I've got nothing to show this year. Well, that's not exactly true. Over the course of this entire year, I was able to capture exactly one clever line from her, and here it is: **"I feel my heart beating in my butt."**

We have no idea when, where, or why she said this. I've quizzed her, and unfortunately, she doesn't remember either. All we can say is: A butt-beating heart does not a Brendelgram make.

We thought we might compensate with a Lydia Charlotte-says-clever-things video, but it turned out to be mostly Lydia Charlotte giggling incomprehensibly. Kristina previewed it and deemed it "infantile," "a waste of bandwidth," and "Maybe some members of your family will enjoy it." (You can gag on it yourself at DougBrendel.com/LC.mov. It will take

15 minutes off of your life.)

Our only hope of staving off Joey's wrath was to rerun Lydia Charlotte's Greatest Hits. Which we have done. Praying that Joey will accept our humble offering.

Meanwhile, other things happened this year:

Natalie arrived this summer to live and work here till the January start of the next semester at Arizona State U. She's planning to pursue a degree in communications. Her sous-chef boyfriend from Arizona visited for 4 days and we ate very well.

Kristofer lived with us till August, when he took an apartment in Lowell, Mass.; he's now happily working fulltime as co-manager of a Journeys store at the mall in Burlington, Mass. His girlfriend Heather has hot hair.

Lydia Charlotte took art classes, dance lessons, voice lessons, served in Girl Scouts, and — during our very fun spring break week at Uncle Karl and Aunt Susan's outside D.C. — her cousin Milla taught her to ride a bike!

New Thing — We continue to be joyfully consumed with our

ministry in Belarus, in the former Soviet Union. Three of us were there this summer, and Doug returned in the fall, and the work continues. After more than two decades, we're more and more consumed with, and delighted by, our unique ministry to the people of the former Soviet Union.

Time & Tide — Kristina continues to love (and be beloved at) her art gallery in Ipswich. A whole new exhibition of amazing artwork every 6 weeks or so.

And... Doug is still (as he will till he dies) writing fundraising stuff for ministries and charities for BBS & Associates and a number of others,

and writing "The Outsidah," a column in the local *Ipswich Chronicle*. The column has given birth to another book, *Only in Ipswich 2013*. Doug volunteers as a member of the board of directors of Family Promise, an effort to care for newly homeless families here on the North Shore.

Grandnews — Some or all of us New England Brendels visited beloved grandparents in CO (they miraculously thrived after last year's massive car crash, hooray!) and TN (Grandpa Brendel turned 80 in May, Grandma turns 80 in January, hooray!). Doug had the great honor of going 3-for-3 officiating at sister-in-law

Joan's children's weddings.

Plus — jolly old England! We stayed with longtime friends Brad and Heidi Barnes in the Cambridge area and celebrated our 25th wedding anniversary by seeing the sights in London and elsewhere ... including *Lion King*!

Finally — Cleo the cat, diagnosed with a brain tumor, did not die. She's on daily phenobarbital, and quite happy. Next year, we expect to the Brendelgram to feature Cleo's clever witticisms.

Meow! Ciao!



YE OLDE LYDIA CHARLOTTE TRANSCRIPT ARCHIVE

- "Mom, do you ever feel like you don't want to go to the bathroom because you don't want to miss anything?"
- "What's the difference between a New York minute and a regular minute?"
- *After many hours of watching Get Smart episodes on DVD:* "I'm talking like 99, aren't I?"
- *Kristina (after Lydia Charlotte made her own lunch):* "You don't need me anymore." *Lydia Charlotte:* "Yes, I do." *Kristina:* "What for?" *Lydia Charlotte:* "For comfort, and management."
- *Talking with Dad:* "Tell me more. It might get interesting."
- *Lydia Charlotte:* "I love you, Mom." *Kristina:* "Remember this, when I won't let you have your friends over for a keg of beer." *Lydia Charlotte:* "What's a keg of beer?"
- *First day of P.E.:* "It was great! We played thirteen hundred tag games! Well, three."
- *Dad:* "Awesome!" *Lydia Charlotte:* "I love it when you say 'Awesome!' It makes you seem 5 years younger. Maybe 10."
- "Snow White slept in the coffin for one year. 365 days. That's like hibernation!"
- "My brain is fighting with me, like a cat in a bowl of string."
- "What if we invented a fork with five points? It would be a fivk!"
- "I love the smell of Grandma and Grandpa, and their house."
- *(talking to Natalie on the phone)* "When Mom hears about it, she'll freak out; that's my hypothesis."
- "Sorting is the hardest part of my whole cleaning career."
- *At dinner, without warning or context:* "How does Dad put his sperm in you? I know how starfish do it."

Come see us! In the meantime: Love God, love people.

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