

a father writes

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a brief mystery of teenage time

*It seems like **only** yesterday that we packed the boys off to school for the spring term. But already the holidays are upon us again, and with them, the **demand** for next term's fees.*

How odd that we **human beings** continue to **cling to** the idea of time as a constant stream, moving like clockwork from the past through the present to the future, when all our senses tell us that it doesn't behave **like that** at all.

In our schooldays, time **creeps towards** the end of term, every minute an hour and every hour a week. **As far as my boys are concerned**, the Christmas holidays were half an eon ago.

But for those of us in **middle age**, life **flashes past** at extraordinary speed. There seems hardly a moment to take down the Christmas baubles and lights before they have to go up again.

Occasionally, time **slams on the brakes**, as when we are waiting for a delayed train or **stuck** in a traffic jam. But, **for the most part**, it **keeps** its foot hard down on the accelerator, and everything **passes in a blur**. Perhaps when I **retire**, and the boys have **fled** the family nest, time will **slow down** again and take me at **ambling pace** to the grave. I'll discover **soon enough**.

It seems pretty clear, **though**, that our idea **of** time, which puts **events** in strict chronological order, is **no more than a figment of the human imagination**, dreamed up to keep us all from going mad. Sometimes I wonder if there **may be** something in those **fashionable theories** that **there is really no such thing as** time. Everything that has happened and will happen is happening right now and for ever, in an infinite number of parallel universes.

I was discussing this with George **the other night** (he is going through an unusually communicative **phase** at the moment) and - blow me down - I found that he **had** come to a very similar **conclusion**. But then, at 15, he has reached that age when the **mind** suddenly starts **questioning** everything, and **opens up to crackpot** theories of every kind, from socialism to reincarnation.

In their early childhood, children are **constantly** asking "Why?". But I do not believe that they are **genuinely seeking** information.

"Why is green, daddy?"

"Why is green **what?**"

"No. Why is green?"

That sort of question isn't a philosophical inquiry. It is just an attempt to **grab attention**. **It is only in their teens that** the young start **grappling** seriously with the great issues of time, infinity, eternity and creation.

The George Kemp Theory of Time, as its author explained it to me, is that the world is "**sort of whizzing** through space" **at** infinite speed, **leaving** as it goes an infinite number of snapshots of itself. So all instants are one, caught and frozen for ever, **as if** by a strobe light. The battles of Marathon, Agincourt and Britain **are being fought at this very moment**.

But this is just **the sort of** theory that teenagers **are always coming up with** - teenage boys, **anyway**. My wife **assures** me that girls are **far** too sensible **to bother** with any such nonsense.

When I was about George's age, I decided that every **human being** who **had** ever existed or **would** exist was me, in a different manifestation, and that I **would be** reincarnated an infinite **number of times** to live everybody's life (as would you - **or rather**, the me that is currently you). But I must be careful **about**

spouting the crackpot theories of my adolescence, or Tony Blair will see to it that I never become manager of the England football team.

Best, I think, to leave these speculations to the nation's teenagers. We older, wiser folk, for whom time is **whizzing past**, can **take refuge from insanity** in a more conventional theory.

To many it will sound **equally barmy**, but it **has been sanctified** by 2,000 years of belief, and at least it has **the merit of explaining** everything that **needs to be explained**. I mean, of course, the theory that God who made the universe became man, was crucified for our sins and rose from the dead on the third day. A very happy Easter to you all.

all set to ride

All set to ride, with money to burn? Don't bank on it, says Tom Kemp

Every commercial transaction that I have anything to do with turns out to be a dreadful mistake. I am the idiot who signed on to CompuServe, in my first flush of internet fever, thinking that because this was among the most expensive service providers, it must be the best for the boys. So it is that I have been paying through the nose ever since for a service that everybody else seems to get free.

I am the fool who thought that it sounded like a good idea to accept a mobile telephone for a free trial, when somebody from BT rang me out of the blue with the offer. When the telephone arrived, I took one look at it and sent it straight back, without having made a single call. But nobody told the BT computer, and for the past four months I have been receiving ever-more-threatening demands for payment of rental. (I think I have sorted this one out now, but be warned).

One arrangement that I have been pleased with, however, is the fancy new bank account that my branch manager recommended when my aunt left me some money a couple of years ago.

Under this deal, I have two accounts: one is an interest-bearing savings account, and the other a joint current account, which I share with my wife. Every night of the working week, the computer at Lloyds automatically transfers money one way or the other between the two accounts, so that every morning my current account is £1,000 in credit. I could find no fault with it, until I set about trying to buy my motor-scooter a fortnight ago.

Attentive readers will remember that this scooter was to be the answer to all my problems. It would keep me out of the pub, it would get me home early and cheaply and it

would **make** lots of time **for me to be** a good father to my sons, and to write my best-selling novel.

As good as my word, I went **down** to the scooter shop **the Saturday before last** and ordered a bright red, 50cc, Piaggio Typhoon XR. Price: L1,399. The man said that it should be ready for me **at** the beginning of the week.

Monday dawned bright and sunny, and, with a song in my heart, I rang the shop. It should be ready tomorrow, said the man. I was **busy** on Tuesday, and so I rang again on Wednesday. "You can **pick it up** tomorrow," said the man from Manana Motors.

So I pitched up at the shop, **clutching** my new crash helmet and leather gauntlets, on my way to work that sunny Thursday morning. "Oh," said the man. "When I said Thursday, I **meant** Thursday afternoon. **Yours** is the next job **up**, Tom. I've got to do my pre-sale **checks**."

OK, I said. I'll pick it up tomorrow morning. So **there I was**, **first thing** on Friday, flourishing my cheque-book while the sun blazed outside. The scooter was ready for me. "Sorry, Tom. We don't take personal cheques. **Company policy.**"

"How about Visa-Delta?"

"**Fine,**" said the man. And he **ran** my card through the machine.

"Sorry, Tom. **Insufficient funds. There must be** a limit on your card." And he looked at me **suspiciously**.

I rang my bank, and a nice woman said that she **would** transfer an extra dollop to my current account, **so that** there **would be** enough on my Visa-Delta card **to cover** the L1,399. But the **extra L399** would **not come through until** the next morning.

So **once again**, I went off to work, scooterless.

Saturday dawned, cold and drizzly. I returned to the shop and **handed over** my card. "Sorry, Tom. Still insufficient funds." I knew what **had** happened. The ruddy Lloyds computer **had** transferred the extra money

to my current account, but **had** then automatically sent it right back again **to keep** my balance **at** £1,000. **Not enough.**

There was nothing **for it but to set off** in the car to the nearest open branch of Lloyds, 40 minutes **away**, and get a bankers' draft for £1,399. Fee £10. How I **resent having to** pay that tenner. Then back to Manana Motors. **At last**, the man was satisfied.

As I set off home on my new scooter, it started **hailing**. It **has been** cold and **windy** ever since. But, my God, I am **thrilled with** the bike. **It really is going to** solve all my problems. Even the boys, who **sneered at** the idea of their father on a "leetle peenk scoooter", **changed their tune** as soon as they saw the handsome beast.

George asked me what **XR stood for**. I didn't have a clue.
"I know," he said. "Extra Respect!"

an old priest who gave so much

All four of my boys have been left some money by an extremely rich and distinguished priest, who died a fortnight ago. I don't know how much but if it is more than a few pounds, I am determined to embezzle it. (Joke, boys, I promise.)

I cannot tell you how **touched** I am by the gift. Nor can I understand it, since we **saw shamefully little** of Monsignor Edward Dunderdale **at** the end of his long life, **meeting** him only a couple of times a year **at most**. I **can think** only that his generosity **took root** in the one **selfless** act that I have performed **in the course of** my otherwise selfish life. That was 15 years ago, when my wife was **heavily** pregnant **with** our eldest son, George.

When my grandfather was **alive**, he **and** my grandmother **used to go** often to a favourite hotel in northern France, where they **became great friends** with the management. **So much so that** the patron gave me a job as a barman **in my gap year**. Years later, I wanted to **show off** the hotel to my wife. She said that it would be kind to take my **ancient** grandmother, since she was **widowed, bored** and lonely - and the hotel **had been** her discovery. **Reluctantly**, I agreed.

My grandmother said that she would love to come. But would it be all right if she brought her great friend, Monsignor Dunderdale? I **groaned inwardly**, but agreed. He was 75, and she **was in her eighties**. The trip didn't **promise to be** a barrel of laughs. But **actually**, it was. He was a **terrifically friendly man**, who **kept** my **crabby** grandmother **on her best behaviour**. He was the most **delightfully agreeable** company - clever, understanding, a great **lover of** food and wine, and **permanently amused** by life.

Two memories stick vividly in my mind. The first is of a Communion Mass that he conducted in his hotel bedroom, with just the four of us, on a Holy Day of Obligation. He had brought a travelling Communion kit with him, and I was greatly embarrassed. This was because I was (and am) a lapsed Catholic, who had not been to confession since I was 13. I was therefore barred from taking Communion.

Anyway, I refused the Host, and settled for a blessing. That made me realise that I was not a total non-believer - because if I had been, I would have taken Communion to be polite, and thought nothing of it. My second memory is of the deep suspicion of the customs officers when our odd little party arrived back in the car at Dover - one ancient grandmother, one elderly priest, one heavily pregnant wife and shifty-looking me. I seem to remember that only one of us was trying to smuggle anything - Mgr Dunderdale, who had absent-mindedly exceeded his allowance of spirits.

I cannot remember whether it was before or after our trip that he was suddenly left a huge sum by his sister. He spent some on a top-of-the-range, air-conditioned BMW, his pride and joy and the only worldly possession that he had ever longed for. He also threw a magnificent 80th birthday party, hiring a medieval hall in Chelsea, flying in friends from all over the world and getting us all drunk with champagne.

He had planned to hire the Banqueting House in Whitehall for his 90th birthday next year. I was really looking forward to that. He was my kind of priest, and the boys all adored him - particularly the youngest. We went to his funeral at Westminster Cathedral on Friday, the six of us. It may sound odd, but it was an extraordinarily happy occasion - dozens of priests and nuns, and the new Cardinal, all

envying Edward for having got to Heaven before them.

I was ashamed at first by how scruffy the boys looked - particularly the youngest, whose only shoes are a pair of flashing trainers, which seemed hardly suitable. But nobody seemed to mind. Only when one of the readers broke down in tears did I feel how bitterly sad this loss is for those who are left behind.

Damn! I have **hardly left room for the point of this column. I promised at the funeral to find a home for Frankie, the Monsignor's 16-year-old Siamese cat - an anti-social animal, by all accounts, but much loved by his master. Offers, please, quickly, because otherwise he will be put down at the weekend.**

angriest people in britain

Tom Kemp says it came as no surprise to hear this week that the parents of school-age children are the angriest people in Britain

According to a survey of 1,000 adults **conducted** for the BBC, a quarter of us parents **admit to losing** our **tempers** at least once a day, while only a tenth of the **population at large** say the same.

But I am not convinced by the experts' explanations: parents **are becoming** more **bad-tempered** because children **put them under constant pressure** to buy **ever-more-expensive** toys and clothes, **encouraged by** aggressive advertising. My four never **pester me for** expensive toys or clothes - **no doubt** because they realise that **there would be no point**. They are as **aware as I am** that the Kemp cupboard is now bare again. (God knows where my late aunt's money **went**, but it **has gone**, every penny.)

But why should anybody seek to **blame** advertisers and marketing men for **the fact that** parents of young children **lose their tempers** more often than anybody else? Why, when the reasons are so blindingly **obvious**? Take last Sunday. **There I was, sitting comfortably** in front of the fire with Peter Ackroyd's London: the Biography, which my brother and his wife **had given** me for Christmas.

The door **burst open**, letting in an icy **, and three boys ran into the room, **fighting over something or other**, I can't remember what. "Shut the door," I said. And the seven-year-old shut it. Then they ran out again, still screaming and **squabbling**. "Shut the door!" I called after them, and the nine-year-old ran back and **slammed** it.**

Half a minute **later**, they were all back again. "Shut the door!" I said, a little louder this time. **With half a**

mind to writing this column, I then set about conducting a little scientific research. For the next 15 minutes, I kept my temper as best I could, gave up reading and simply counted the number of times that the boys burst into the room and out of it again, leaving the door open. Each time that they ran in or out, I got up and shut the door myself.

I can now publish my research. In the course of those 15 minutes, the boys opened the door, and left it open, no fewer than 22 times. The last time it happened, I roared after them at the top of my voice: "Shut the bloody door and keep out of here!" The nine-year-old poked his head round the door, grinned from ear to ear and said: "Ooooh! Batey, batey! Keep your hair on, daddy!"

And the BBC's experts say that they were "surprised" to find that the parents of school-age children lose their tempers more often than anybody else... We parents suffer a thousand irritations every day, which the childless never have to endure. Shoes, for instance. I know that I keep going on about shoes, but why is it that every time we want to set off for a walk in the park, we find that at least one boy has lost his shoes, and we have to spend 20 minutes hunting for them?

Why do all four boys take the towels off to their rooms after they have had a bath, leaving them there on the floor, cold and wet, so that there is no warm, dry towel for me in the morning? Why is it that every time there is something I particularly want to watch on television, one of my sons has a tantrum, or throws up, or positions himself exactly between my armchair and the screen, so that I can't see or hear anything?

Why is it that when the seven-year-old demands a peanut butter sandwich, and I make it for him even though the very smell of peanut butter makes me retch, he refuses to eat it because I have cut it

diagonally rather than horizontally? Let me tell the BBC's experts exactly why it is that parents lose their tempers more often than anybody else. It has nothing to do with aggressive advertising or marketing, or "peer-group pressure" from our children's friends at school.

We parents of school-age children lose our tempers more often than anybody else simply because we have school-age children.

another decade - and the duvet - slips strangely away

Tom Kemp's tips for campers. No 1: before dismantling your tent in the morning, make sure that it is unoccupied. I failed to take my own advice on Bank Holiday Monday when I returned to my sister-in-law's house in Gloucestershire the morning after her husband's 50th birthday party.

My wife and I had been up until the early hours before we abandoned the boys - two sleeping on the floor in the house, two in the tent with the dog - and headed off to a B&B up the road.

After breakfast, we went back to the house **to find** my wife's brother-in-law **clearing up the wreckage of the night before**. About 25 people **had stayed** in his house or in tents in his garden **overnight - mostly the late-teenage and twentysomething friends of my nephews and nieces**. But **none of them had stirred by the time** we came back in the morning.

There was plenty of **evidence**, however, of the **havoc they had wreaked** the night before: broken glasses on the carpets; cigarette **burns** on the dining room table; wine **spilt** everywhere; cushions from the armchairs and sofas left out in the garden **to get soaked**.

My wife's brother-in-law **noted**, more in sorrow than in anger, that somebody **had drunk** the bottle of tequila that he **had been given** as a present. He **had rather been looking forward** to that, he said.

For years, I have **comforted myself** with the thought that my children **would** become civilised when they **reached adulthood**. They **would no longer be burdens to** their parents; they **would be assets, helping around the house and generally making themselves pleasant**. Now I am not so sure.

I asked what **had become of** my sons, and **was told** that they **had been up and about** for hours. They were taking the dog for a walk across the fields. So while my wife **got stuck into** the washing up, I **went off to** dismantle the tent.

I **had** just pulled out all the pegs, and the roof had **collapsed** nicely, when I heard a low, animal **groan of fury** from inside: not the dog, but my 14-year-old son, George, still in all his clothes under a **heap of sleeping bags**. I later discovered that he **had been dancing** until 4 am. **No wonder** he was annoyed.

I **hauled** him out of the collapsed tent, and the other three boys **reappeared** with the dog. They said that they **wanted to try their hands at** golf, so I took them to the course up the road.

While we **were playing** our nine holes, the 13-year-old told me what **had** happened to him during the night. There he **had been, fast asleep** on the sitting room floor under the duvet that he **had** brought with him from London, when a beautiful young woman **in her early twenties** walked in, the friend of one of his cousins. She woke him up and asked whether it **was** all right if she **took** his duvet. She then **walked off** with it and calmly **snuggled up** on the sofa.

It was very cold, and the poor boy **snuck away** to the kitchen **to spend** the rest of a **sleepless** night on the bare wooden floor, **pressed up against** the Aga. I asked him why he **had not said no to** this **monstrous** woman, when she **had** asked to borrow his duvet.

"But I couldn't," he said. "She was a **grown-up**."

Good for him, of course, **for showing** such politeness. But I also **thought** how **astonishingly evil** it was **of** this young woman **even to consider robbing** a sleeping child of his bedding. It **occurred to me** that this was **the sort of** crime that only a girl could commit, and only a beautiful girl **at that**. For the first time in my

life, I thanked the Lord that I **had** produced only boys.

When we **got back** to the house after our golf, my wife, her sister and her husband **were just finishing** the clearing up. **At the very moment** when the last glass **had been dried and put away**, doors started to open and dozens of **bleary-eyed** teenagers and **twentysomethings** appeared, **asking** sweetly, and with **impeccable timing**, if **there was** anything they **could do to help**. Told that they **were** too late, they started making themselves coffee and **messing up** the house again.

Parenthood clearly **gets no easier** when the children grow up. But at least I haven't got any daughters.

a thai joy to have around

*Tom Kemp says his **anxieties** about his Thai guest proved groundless*

Now **there are seven of us**. The Thai boy arrived at the weekend for his **month-long exchange visit** and, **so far**, all my **anxieties about him have proved groundless**.

People **had been** terrifying me for weeks with **tales of Thai manners and customs**. I **was told** that we should be careful **not to raise our voices** while our visitor **was around**, since the Thais **regarded shouting as offensive**. Somebody else warned me that **on no account should we let our visitor see** the soles of our shoes, **nor** should we touch our feet in his presence, since the Thais **had a thing about** feet and footwear.

Then **there was** the question **of how he would cope with life without servants**. We **had been warned** that the children **at his school were used to having as many as 25 people to look after them**. He would not find **so much as a cleaning lady at the Kemps'**. And what would he **make of English food**? Would **there be** a language problem? How would he **cope with our climate**? I was afraid that **within minutes of his arrival in our disorderly household**, the poor boy - **an only child** - would be in floods of tears and **begging to be sent home**.

Not a bit of it. True, he was **shattered and shivering** when he arrived **at dawn** on Saturday - but who wouldn't be, after a 12-hour night flight from sunny Thailand to icy London? (It **does seem** cruel **of my boys' school to arrange these exchange trips in the depths of the English winter**. Perhaps it **is supposed to be character-building**.) After **sleeping for most of the day** and all night, our 13-year-old visitor seemed to **adapt** without the **slightest difficulty** to life **chez Kemp**. If the **boys' shouting offends him**, he doesn't show it - and he **doesn't seem to have** any strong **feelings about** feet.

He eats everything **put** in front of him and is **invariably cheerful**, humorous and polite, always offering **to help - all in all, a joy to have around**. **It helps** that his school teaches English - he has no **difficulty** with the language. It is also good that he came **over** with seven schoolfriends, who are all **staying** locally **with** my 13-year-old's friends. So the telephone lines of south London are **constantly buzzing** with Thai and English **chatter**, and **my wife and I are kept busy ferrying boys to impromptu international parties**. Having Jetsada to stay ("Jet" to his friends) has **brought home to me** how much the world **has shrunk** during my **lifetime**, and how similar the lives of easterners and westerners **are becoming**.

He plays the same video games **as** my sons - the only difference is that they **seem to be 100 times** cheaper in Thailand - watches the same American television programmes, and is as devoted as they **are to sending emails** to his friends. **What** has pleased me **about** Jet's visit is that it is **bringing out the best in** our own 13-year-old. He is very **aware of** his duties as a **host**, and is **forever thinking of ways to entertain** his guest (darts **has been a great success**).

From my point of view, the only down-side (apart from the fact that there are now seven of us competing for our only bathroom) is that his arrival has **brought home to me** the **dingy squalor** of south London. I wish that I could be more proud **of** my home town, but I feel nothing **but shame** as I drive our guest through the **mean, dirty streets, avoiding the ever-growing potholes** in the roads.

I am therefore arranging a **packed programme of sightseeing** to fill our visitor's weekends. My sons are not **keen on** the plan. As for Jet, he says that the only **thing** that he really wants to do while he is in London is go to a football match. It seems that 13-year-olds, **the world over**, are exactly the same.

back to earth with a bump

Well, that's that, then. After a year and a bit spent living wildly beyond my income, I have finally spent the last of my aunt's legacy. The school fees bill for next term has come in, and my best-seller remains unfinished. All right, I'll be honest. It remains unstarted.

To cap it all, the Government has just declared that it is "extremist" of the Conservatives to seek to do anything to help non-working mothers.

Reality has returned with a mighty thump to the Kemp household. There is only one thing for it. My long-suffering, overworked wife is going to have to get a paid job. Poor her. Oh, but much more to the point - poor, poor me.

Who is going to iron my shirts and cook my meals when my wife has a living to earn? Who will take the boys to school in the mornings, and pick them up in the afternoons? Who will do all the shopping, washing and cleaning for our family of six? Who will mop my sweaty forehead when I get home from work on my scooter, pour me my whisky and tell me to put my feet up, because I am the family breadwinner and I have done enough?

The awful truth is beginning to dawn on me that when my wife finds a job, I am actually going to be expected to help around the house. I'll have to supervise the six-year-old's bathtime, read bed-time stories, arbitrate in disputes between the boys. God forbid, I may even be expected to cook a meal from time to time. (This will be bad luck on the rest of the family, too. My culinary repertoire extends no further than toast, boiled eggs and my own patent version of spaghetti bolognese, perfected in my bachelor days and by no means to everybody's taste.)

No longer will I be able to slump in my armchair with the crossword, congratulating myself on having kept the family ship floating for another day by my labours at the office.

Nor is my wife happy with the idea of going back to work after all these years. A hatred of paid employment is one of the things that she and I have had in common from the start. In fact, when she discovered that she was pregnant with George 15 years ago, the first thing that she said to me, when the initial shock of joy had passed, was: "Hey! I'll be able to give up work!"

Two years later, when the family finances were in a particularly bad way, she was back in the jobs market. But on the very day when she received an offer, she discovered that she was expecting our 13-year-old. Once again, the prospect of motherhood spared her from the office, and guaranteed me a continuing supply of hot meals and washed and ironed shirts.

The years passed, the eight-year-old came along, and, at last, the bank manager's patience snapped. My wife was forced to go back to work and for the better part of two years she was a working mum, taking our new baby with her to the creche. They were not happy days. She was exhausted, I was exhausted, and we all began to tire of our diet of toast, boiled eggs and spaghetti bolognese.

But then salvation came again, with the birth of the six-year-old. And since that day, my wife has done no paid work but a little light typing for friends and acquaintances. (Actually, I did a bit of it for her. I find typing other people's work relaxing and therapeutic, and I would much rather do that than iron a shirt or cook a meal - but don't tell that to any secretary.)

This time, however, **there can be no** escape, because I promise you this: we are not going to have a fifth child.

My wife **has spent** the past few days searching **miserably** for work. We tried **the Internet** first, because everybody says that it is so **marvellous** for **job-seekers**. Well, it **may be** marvellous for anyone who wants to be a travelling salesman in Arkansas but, believe me, it is **no use** for mothers-of-four **seeking** part-time secretarial work in the Dulwich area of south London.

Come along, somebody out there **must want to employ** a **highly experienced** former secretary - **slightly rusty**, perhaps, but an excellent **typist**, **computer-literate** and with an **appearance** and telephone manner **to die for**.

Address all offers, please, c/o Tom Kemp at The Daily Telegraph, 1 Canada Square, London E14 5DT. **Top rates of pay and flexible hours are essential**. Remember that Mrs Kemp **has shirts to iron**.

you simply can't beat a big family

We were in the wilds of the Scottish countryside at the weekend for the 18th birthday party of one of my wife's nephews. My God, how quickly they grow up.

Many years ago, I swore that I would never be the sort of person who went around saying: "My God, how quickly they grow up". But it's true. I remember the boy as if it were yesterday, charging around his parents' house in his baby-walker. Now here he is bopping the night away with the girls, throwing back the lager and wondering what sort of car he should demand for his birthday.

I do not notice these changes nearly so much with my own boys, seeing them every day. But it is only a couple of times a year that I see their Scottish cousins, and every time I do, they have changed almost beyond recognition. I suppose that I must just get used to the idea that most of my nephews and nieces are now young adults - and any minute now, my own four sons will be grown up, too.

The birthday party was a great gathering of my wife's enormous clan. But there were fewer of the younger generation than usual, since so many of them have gone off to lead lives of their own.

One of my many sisters-in-law, three of whose four children now have homes and jobs of their own, told us how she envied us for still having all of our children in tow. Make the most of them now, she said, because you are going to miss them dreadfully when they have gone.

I am quite sure that she did not feel like that 10 years ago, when, like me, she was longing for her children to lead independent lives, so that she could get a life of her own.

But I bet that she is right. A few years **from now**, I **will be looking back on** these boring, exhausting, expensive days, **with four boys rampaging around the house**, fighting, screaming and sulking, as the happiest of my life. I **will be writing** to some Tom Kemp of the future, as so many readers write to me now, **telling** him to enjoy his children **while he can**, because it will be so sad for him when they grow up. **What strange tricks the memory plays.**

Meanwhile, however, my wife and I must **cope with** the reality of life with four sons, when everything is exactly six times more complicated and **painstaking** than life for the childless.

Take our trip to Scotland this weekend. We could not **face the drive** and so we decided **to take** the train and hire a car at the other end. Two cars, **as it turned out**, because the hire firm **insisted** that **no more than** five people could travel in any of its vehicles. (**How ridiculous.** It is one of the laws of physics that **you can squash** any number of children into any car with perfect safety.)

At the hotel, we had to book four rooms, although we **could easily have made do** with two, and let the boys sleep top-to-tail. Six sets of clothes **to pack**, unpack and re-pack. Six return tickets **to book**. Six seats to find on the train. Six lots of drinks and sandwiches to buy in the buffet car.

For my **child-free** friends, a trip to Scotland for the weekend is just **a matter of throwing** a few things into a bag and jumping **on to** a train. For the Kemps, it was a military manoeuvre, planned weeks **in advance** and with a budget **to make** the Ministry of Defence **blanch**.

But it was **worth it**. The party was a wild success. The boys could hardly contain their ecstasy **at having** hotel rooms **of their own**, with their own showers, tellies, kettles and sachets of hot-chocolate powder.

Best of all, on the night when we arrived at the hotel, they held their weekly pub quiz in the bar downstairs. The six of us entered as a team, with the honour of England resting on our shoulders. And what a perfect team my dysfunctional family made.

Having no interests in common, we all know about different things. The 12-year-old is our expert on sport. My wife knows everything that there is to know about events and music from the 1960s to the 1980s, and George takes up where she leaves off. The younger two handle the Pokémon and Teletubbies questions, and I look after anything pre-1900.

Reader, we won the top prize of a tenner, much to the fury of the locals. Perhaps I'm going to miss them, after all.