

# 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** L1,000. **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 L1,399. Fee L10. 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 "leettle peenk scooter", **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 draught, 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** e-mails 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 **sight-seeing** 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.**