



Dadhood 2: The Sequel

By William McKeen

When I tell people I have seven children, their jaws drop, they stutter, they accuse me of pulling their legs, and some go off on semi-operatic rants, telling me it's irresponsible to have so many children. Then they blame me for global warming, high gas prices and the upcoming nuclear war.

And sometimes, with a wink-wink nudge-nudge, some people say, "There's a cure for that, you know." A semi-crude birth-control joke follows.

It's a little weird in this 1.8-children era to have a Waltons-sized clan. My gang ranges from newborn to 25, so it's not like we have to outfit a Bluebird bus to go to the grocery store. But when we are together, it's kind of overwhelming. While toting my newborn around, I expect to hear: "How sweet of Grandpa to help out."

I first became a father at 25 and last at 50. My contemporaries are having *ain't-this-fun ... now-go-home* moments with grandchildren, but I'm getting up for 3 a.m. feedings.

This isn't *The Waltons* or *Father Knows Best* or any of those other idealized television families we grew up with. We're talking seven kids across a quarter century, two marriages and 850 miles. My first three — Sarah, 25, Graham, 23, and Mary, 18 — grew up in Indiana, where they moved after their mother and I divorced. I became a road warrior.

At least once a month, I'd take off after my Wednesday class and drive 15 hours straight to Indiana, in time to pick the kids up from school on Thursday. After two groggy days, I'd hit the road on Sunday and return to my job in Florida. My Nissan was my home: one mad-dog weekend a month, summers in Florida, holidays in Indiana.

I was bathing Mary during my spring break visit when she was 4. We were upstairs at my mother's house, just a mile from my former wife's home. I'd had the kids all week and my former wife had gone to the movies every day after work.

There, in the tub, Mary began to cry. "I miss Mommy," she said.

"Well, tomorrow's Saturday," I said. "I'll take you back to Mommy's because I have to leave early Sunday."

"But then I'll miss *you*," Mary said, splashing bathwater in frustration. "I'm always missing *someone*."

For two decades, that was my life. I had two close calls with remarriage, but the deals meant giving up the long hauls to see the kids. So I stayed single.

My children were mostly grown and I'd long-since resolved to remain a solo act when I got blindsided by the thunder hammer of love. Now I'm remarried and have four more children: Savannah, 8, Jack, 3, Travis, 2, and Charley, the baby. The big ones — a couple of them now tax-paying college graduates — have embraced the little ones. We're one, big offensive-line of a family. It reminds me that of all my job titles — writer, professor, department chairman — "husband/father" is what matters most.

Maybe since I see the end result — I see how these kids go from drool-and-stool to wonderful and productive adults — I'm appreciating dadhood more than the other parents next to me in the diaper aisle. I know the secret. I feel like turning to one of these young fathers and saying: *Dude, it is going to be a wonderful ride. There'll be problems and angry words and all, and that infant in your arms is going to grow up and eat a whole box of Cheerios in one sitting and turn into your own personal Jethro Bodine. And you'll earn your pay as a dad by setting him straight. And when it's all over, you'll be glad you punched the ticket.*

My little boy Graham is 23 now. We took a 6,000-mile trip together a couple of years ago, doing a book called "Highway 61." I wrote about the flashbacks I had on the road — I kept looking over and seeing this *man* at the wheel and at the same time, seeing my little 4-year-old running across the park, yelling, "Get me, Daddy!"

And so I have another flashback when I take Jack, Graham's little brother, to a Cleveland Indians spring training game. After the game, kids are invited to run the bases. I set Jack down on first base and he takes off, calling over his shoulder, "Get me, Daddy!" He's wearing one of Graham's old ball caps, big as his body, and he's running harder than the 10- and 12-year-olds out there. The whole stadium watches my son. In the stands behind me a woman says, "Look at that beautiful little boy," and a thousand hearts melt in unison.

And I think: *Here it comes again. This is what it's all about. This is why I'm here.*

If there's a cure for *this*, I don't want to know. —



KOR Photography

William McKeen with his wife and *blah blah*, need a caption to go here naming the people in the photo