Awkward Family Photos

Mike Bauder and Doug Chornack
This book is dedicated to our own awkward families
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About the Authors
Family. They’re the people we love, the people we trust and confide in, the people we identify with. But there’s something else about family that isn’t often spoken about, because, well, it’s not always comfortable to admit. So, let’s just put it out there—family is awkward. That’s right. When a group of people with the same name and different personalities are forced to spend most of their lives together, plenty of uncomfortable moments are sure to follow. And when a camera is there to capture one of those moments, an awkward family photo is born.

So, we set out to create a friendly place where people could suffer together and feel comfortable sharing their own odd family moments. We launched AwkwardFamilyPhotos.com in April 2009 with a handful of pics gathered from our families and friends. A friend who worked for a radio station in Providence, Rhode Island, offered to post our link on the station’s website. We thought we would get only a few hits, but when the link was picked up by radio stations all over the country, photographs of families straddling trees and piled on top of one another flooded in, with comments like “Thank you for showing me that my family isn’t the only one!” and “Oh, you think your family is awkward???” They were sent to us from teens, mothers, fathers, and grandparents. And they didn’t just come from the United States. There were submissions from Australia, England, Norway, Brazil, the Czech Republic, China, and all over the world. It quickly became clear to us that the awkward family was a universal phenomenon.

This book features popular photos and stories from the site, and also many never-before-seen ones. Ultimately, though, it is about much more than just photos and stories. It’s about celebrating the family experience and shining a light on all of those deliciously awkward moments that come with the price of membership: the road-trip sing-along, the meeting of the in-laws, having to take a cousin to the school dance.

There has been much debate on the website as to what constitutes a family photo. For us, it has always included everything from the classics (portraits, holidays, vacations, weddings, etc.) to those random pictures we probably have stuffed in a drawer or packed into shoeboxes in the attic (old school photos, family pet pictures, even the solo shot Mom made us take with our viola). As far as a perfect definition of awkwardness, we don’t know that it exists. Everyone can look at a picture and take away something different about what makes it awkward, but as long as the viewer feels some level of discomfort, there is awkwardness.

We want to acknowledge and thank the people who have made the awkwardness possible—the amazing families who so generously shared their photos with us. You let us into your homes and you did it with a sense of humor. Through your pictures, we see our own families and can take comfort that we’re in good company. It is our hope that this book will bring all our families a little closer together as we acknowledge those special times when we wished we were a lot farther apart.

Awkwardly,
Mike Bender and Doug Chernack
www.AwkwardFamilyPhotos.com
Walk into just about anyone’s home and you can find one hanging prominently on the wall proudly displayed for all to see. An attempt at wish fulfillment for Mom and Dad, the family portrait provides the chance for them to capture the ideal vision of their brood—ridiculously happy, clean-cut, well-dressed, and not trying to kill one another. For some of us, the image was created in a mall studio where a “professional” photographer arranged us by height, tilted our heads, placed our hands on our siblings’ shoulders, and reminded us to keep smiling despite the blinding lights in our faces and the dreary backdrop behind us. Others opted for the old self-timer technique, which left us frozen in the same position for over an hour while Dad tried to make the damn thing work.

But if we look past the matching sweaters and the choreographed poses, we will often see a more interesting story—the true family dynamic, complete with quirks and vulnerabilities. Perhaps not the ideal family Mom and Dad were hoping to spotlight, but the results are often the most honest snapshots of all.
The photographer felt that adding a fake plant would make this portrait look more natural.
The Homestead

This family sends a mixed message of “Welcome to our home” and “Stay the hell off our property.”
Choose your own adventure.
Immediately following the portrait session, everyone in this family headed out for a job interview.
Generational differences can be put aside in a galaxy far, far away.
THERE'S PLENTY OF ROOM ON THE COUCH

But the chairs are all taken.
This is the first photo we took after moving to Humble, Texas, from Chicago in 1981. My dad’s intention was that we should look the part. You be the judge.

The Bychowski Family
Humble, Texas
My parents always wanted a boy, so they forced us to show our manly side with these homemade ties.

The Perry Family
Redmond, Washington
We went to Holland, where my mother is from, and had this picture taken. The thing that strikes me most is the fact that we are doing several activities awkwardly close to each other that are not particularly compatible—spinning wool, pouring hot water, and cleaning fish? Oh, and did I mention the wooden shoes?

The Kleinman Family
Mountlake Terrace, Washington
He felt he had been carrying them for too long.
You know there’s drama in the family when there is literally an elephant in the room.
For all the families who came to my portrait studio, I have a confession to make. I know that I told you forty-five degree head turns and hands on shoulders were good ideas, but as you’re probably well aware now, that kind of wasn’t true.

Here’s the story. When I took the job, the company made all of the photographers go through this old-school training program that probably hadn’t been updated since the fifties. They told us that these “popular” poses were the best sellers and that it was our job to sell them. So, when you asked us, “Does this look good to you?” and I told you with a straight face, “It’s good enough to be in a magazine!”, what I really should have said was, “Maybe in 1953.” For that, I’m sorry, and although you might never have made it into that magazine, I can say that your family portrait is probably good enough to make it into this book.

Salvatore Sebergandio
THE LOOKOUT

Mind the fro.
Imagine growing up and never even knowing what a crumb looks like.
This baby has just experienced its first invasion of personal space.
The Armshelf

The ‘69 Mustang, Aviator sunglasses, the Armshelf. Need we say more? This classic pose simply and elegantly states, “I’m carefree, playful, and badass enough to support the weight of my own head when lying on my side in a horizontal position.” If that’s the vibe you’re going for, then the A-shelf is one weapon you should consider adding to your arsenal.
The Lean
Warning: This pose isn’t for the conservative family. It’s for the clan with sass, one that wants to convey, “Heads up,” “Coming at ya,” “In your face,” “Take a closer look,” and, of course, “You rang?” Combine with two arm-fold bookends and you’ve got yourselves an album scurcher.
The Pile-On
For that tight-knit group who are so close, they are literally on top of one another. For maximum comfort, go denim.
The Oh-What-a-Feeling
If you get the urge to jump for joy at your next family reunion, then reach for the sky with this overly enthusiastic fan favorite. Fully extended arms won’t get you any higher, but they will distract others from noticing there’s only an inch between you and the ground.
MY TWO DADS

If only there was some way to tell who is who …
... Ah, that’s more like it.
Even though they share the same last name, physical features, and chromosomal makeup, some families feel the need to present even more evidence that they're related. What better way to do that than through the unifying power of matching clothing?

MATCHY-MATCHY
For Mom and Dad, taking the family portrait is serious business. After all, this is their chance to show everyone at work how perfect their kids are. So, when things go awry, they are there to keep the progeny in line. Sort of.
Mom and Dad

No matter how old we are, our parents always seem like the most awkward people who have ever lived. Dad is famous for his Hawaiian shirts, taking naps at the movies, and singing along to the easy listening station while we’re in the backseat with our friends. Mom is known for her perms, constantly mispronouncing people’s names, and insisting on coming into the party to pick us up. And no matter how many times we roll our eyes and ask them to please not be so embarrassing, they continue to make it their mission to humiliate us on a daily basis.

Truth is, that embarrassment is a small price to pay for having two people who will always be there for us. Still, it wouldn’t hurt to lower the pants a few inches, lose the fanny packs, and stop picking up the phone when we’re already on the line.
A FATHER’S LOVE

Who says fathers and sons have trouble showing affection?
Mom will support you no matter what you decide to do in life as long as it’s exactly what she tells you.
Yes, this is the man that will be guiding you through the most important decisions of your life.
Lately, Mom and Dad have been doing everything together.
One summer when I was sixteen, I was hanging out with my dad (he worked from home for a few years). One day my mom called just to check in. I picked up the phone to say “Hi” to my mom. Seconds later my dad picked up, not knowing that I had as well. He propositioned my mother for a “quickie.” My mother hesitated and then said, “Son, are you still on the phone?”

Jeff
Little Rock, Arkansas
I was a big Yankees fan growing up, and when my dad bought tickets to take me to my first game, I was so excited. I couldn’t wait to go to Yankee Stadium, eat a hot dog, and maybe catch a foul ball (I, of course, brought a mitt just in case). In the fifth inning, I couldn’t believe it when a foul ball was actually headed our way. I stood up, raised my glove into the air … and was knocked to the ground by another fan, who jumped on top of me to catch it. The other fan was my dad.

Doug
Bernardsville, New Jersey
I recently brought several loads of laundry to my parents’ house to do while they were out of town. Today, I received the following e-mail from my dad:

*Found what appears to be black ladies’ underdrawers (maybe a G-string) in the family room and Tom claims they’re not his. Any ideas? Love, Dad*

Vanessa
New York, New York
When I was fifteen, my dad took us on a family cruise to the Caribbean. To save money, we all shared a stateroom. My dad snores at night, and after a few days of no sleep I decided to shove my bedding in the tub and sleep there. Around 5 A.M. I woke up to my dad making sounds on the toilet. I was afraid I’d give him a heart attack if I said something, so I remained quiet behind the curtain for a hellacious grunt-filled forty-five minutes.

Anna
Bentonville, Arkansas
Mom and I went on vacation in Hawaii and when we checked into the room, I watched in amazement as she unpacked a blender from her suitcase. She planned on making her own smoothies because they’re so expensive at hotels and because, she said, the fruit is fresh in Hawaii. And the best part was that every time she blended one up, she would remind me how much she’d saved us. In the end, I believe the grand total came to $8.75.

SuChin
New York, New York
He’s wondering if they come with a gift receipt.
This mother and daughter vow to love, honor, and cherish driving each other crazy.
Sit on it, Dad.
Clearly, Mom and Dad’s love for each other is infectious …
SAFE AND SOUND

We can always take comfort in knowing that on Mom and Dad’s watch, we’ll never be put in harm’s way.
When we look back at pictures of our childhood, it’s obvious that being a kid was one extended period of awkwardness. We can be excused for our appearance in our first few years; however, once we hit the double digits, we had to share in some of the blame. After all, we parted our own feathered hair down the middle, sported those Velcro sneakers with zipper pockets, and proudly wore mesh shirts. And that was just the tween years, only a warm-up to the turbulent storm of teendom, when certain parts of our bodies grew while others lagged behind; our voices cracked; we started wearing a bra; and our faces erupted. We were forced to don awkward accessories: thick-rimmed glasses, braces, or—worst case scenario—headgear. We discovered the opposite sex, but for all the reasons listed above, the opposite sex didn’t discover us. It seemed like we were dealing with a potentially life-threatening crisis every day.

Luckily, we don’t have to rely on just our memories to help us recall all of these painful moments, because our parents were taking pictures every step of the way.
For anyone who doubts that an awkwardness gene exists, we’d like to present the following scientific evidence …
The great thing about kids is that they tell us exactly what they’re thinking.
Don’t let the snowman sweater fool you.
SLEEPING BEAUTY

She needed to take a quick power nap before her nap.
Cute, cuddly, occasionally terrifying. For the kids, dolls are like members of the family, so AFP honors these tiny lifelike inanimates for making it all right to talk to ourselves.
While we all downplayed it, Picture Day was one of the most stressful dates on the school calendar. The resulting photo would, after all, be documented in the yearbook and carried around in Mom’s wallet, ready to be whipped out whenever anyone asked about the family. We dressed in what we (or our parents) considered our best outfits and waited in a painfully long line with our classmates. As we arrived at the front the photographer offered us a flimsy comb with which to fix our hair. We took our seat in front of the camera and chose a backdrop—distant planets, clusters of stars, multicolored lasers—making it unclear whether we were posing for a school photo or auditioning for a strange, low-budget science fiction movie. When the photographer told us to smile, we gave it our best shot and convinced ourselves that maybe this year we could pull it off.
Puberty’s going to be a breeze for this awkward tween.
This young man is already bulking up for next year’s colored pencil portrait.
This is me. All dressed up at my mother’s fortieth birthday—wrapped in balloons and looking like a child prostitute.

Paula
Galesburg, Illinois
I was born in Spain and we had a bidet in the bathroom. My mom caught me using it as a water fountain and allowed me to continue (don’t worry, they never used it).

Steven
Brevard County, Florida
This is me in my eighth-grade band picture. Note the American Thunder T-shirt, tight white Levi's, and the goggles ... I mean, glasses. Not to mention the trombone. Standing at half-court.

Mary

Dora, Alabama
This is me in grade three. When I was fat. My mom decided it would be a good idea for me to wear my Cub Scout uniform for my school photo. I tried to make a huge smile for the camera, but I clenched my mouth so tight that it turned into a creepy frown. Yes, my parents made me go back for retakes.

Collin
Edmonton, Alberta
This is one of my 1988 dance recital portraits from the Dancer’s Studio in Dearborn, Michigan. I was twelve years old and obviously at that stage where I had no idea what to do with my body. Everything was out of proportion; my glasses were too big, my tights were too big, and I could never get my bangs right. The photographer posed us, and for me, there was really no other option than the jazz hands.

Adriana
Dearborn Heights, Michigan
A BEAUTIFUL MIND

Ever wonder what the kid with the clarinet is really thinking?
Childhood is a confusing journey. We all need a teammate, someone who’s got our back. Someone who understands our frustrations because they live under the same roof, who has to deal with the same house rules, and the same cringe-inducing parents. This kind of support would be wonderful … but instead we have siblings.

They know us better than anyone, which really means they know how to press our buttons better than anyone. They steal our toys, pull our hair, punch us, and then tell Mom and Dad that we started it. We tell them to go away, but they’re everywhere—torturing us in the bathroom, at the dinner table, from the bunk above. And just when we’ve written them off completely, something strange happens … they do something nice. Maybe it’s confronting the school bully, giving us some good advice, or covering for us when Mom and Dad get upset. In that moment, we truly feel connected with our brother or sister; they become the partner in crime we always hoped they would be. And even though they’ve got us in a sleeper hold five minutes later, we’re suddenly okay with it, because we now know it’s just their unique way of showing that they love us.
These siblings demonstrate an impressive ability to keep their hands to themselves.
Sometimes the youngest can feel a bit overshadowed.
These three decided to hitchhike to the portrait studio just because they could.
This little girl finally found something to smile about.
We spend most of our childhood telling them to leave us alone. Then some photographer gives them permission to put their hands on us and we’re supposed to smile about this? Not a chance.
Nick’s sister felt the need to prove that she was also into fighter jets.
LEAN ON ME

A very supportive older brother.
They have finally accepted their recreational differences.
This is a picture of my brother and me taken in the mid to late eighties. At the time, we must have been somewhere between fifteen and seventeen years old and we pretty much spent all of our time in all-out teen sibling war (screaming, door slamming, insults). Why the photographer chose to make it look like he was a figment of my imagination I’ll never know, but it sure would have been nice if he was.

Anna and Dane
Vancouver, British Columbia
We were always at the height of Iowa style (hence my bowl haircut and my sister's permullet). Lucky for us, my dad had connections in the optometry industry, giving us the unique privilege of wearing the latest, huge, Photo Gray lenses.

Michael and Susan
Norwalk, Iowa
I’m the one on the far right, with a black eye my sister gave me. She wanted to braid my hair; I refused and pushed her arms away. Naturally, she belted me in the face.

Tracy
Port Alberni, British Columbia
It was just after my fourth birthday when my mom and dad decided it would be fun to take my older sister, Lauren, and me on a vacation to a ski resort in Michigan. The trip would have been a good chance for some family bonding, but since I was too young to be in their ski group, I got sent to the “ski babies” club.

When my mom came to pick me up at the end of the day, she saw that I had been put underneath a table with a homemade sign that read “timeout.” She was then informed that I wasn’t welcome to come back the next day because I had used “extremely inappropriate language.”

Frustrated, she took me back to the cabin where we were staying and left me to play a board game with my sister, while she tried to figure out what on earth she was going to do with me for the duration of our stay. We had been playing Hi Ho! Cherry-O for a while, and I really had to pee. Really, really had to pee. Lauren kept daring me to leave, but I knew her ways. She was a sneaky cheater when it came to these games. Given my competitive nature, there was no way I was going to let that happen. I figured I would just wait it out, but it was getting pretty difficult. I had a feeling that if I went pee right there, there was a chance nobody would even notice. So I took my chances and peed in my pants. As I finished going, my mom called my sister and me into the other room so that we could take a photo. When she saw what had happened, she was so fed up with me that she made the decision to take the photo anyway. When we returned from our vacation she sent out the picture for a Happy New Year’s card to family and friends. To this day when I am reintroduced to old family friends, they say, “You don’t remember me, but I’ll never forget that picture of you peeing your pants!”

Alex
Chicago, Illinois
here isn’t anything a grandparent wouldn’t do for their grandchild. We’re their pride and joy; our every visit is treated as a holiday where they let us watch TV as long as we want and buy us the fudge pops Mom and Dad won’t let us eat. They take pride in our every accomplishment (real or, more often, embellished) and brag about it to all of their friends. And to show their affection, they give us two-dollar bills, pinch us on the cheek, and tag-team call us. They tell us the same old story about the time we threw up in the middle of a restaurant and then retell it five minutes later. They wouldn’t dream of missing a birth, a graduation, or a wedding, and who else can we count on to take out-of-focus photos of our every move with the camera that’s constantly tethered to their wrist? And they do all this out of love, of course—unconditional love, which is the most wonderful kind. And so although these two early bird specials possess the greatest potential for awkwardness, they are the only people in the family who get a pass. Even in BluBlockers and black socks.
Unconditional love just got conditional.
Just wait till Grandpa hears about video games.
A tribute to the man who’s never afraid to show his affection (even when we are).
You’ve heard of “Mom Jeans”? Introducing “Grandma Pants.”
One moment she’s giving us a hard candy, the next she’s wielding a double-barrel shotgun and loving it. We wonder whether she has a screw loose, but something tells us she knows exactly what she’s doing. You go, Grandma.
It was always difficult for Brian to explain that his grandfather was a vegetarian.
A few years after my grandmother passed away, my grandpa started dating again. He didn't want to tell anyone because he thought that we would be upset (which we were not), but we all knew that he had been dating his old high school sweetheart, Sue. One day my cousin went to visit him and through the front window saw him sitting on the couch with Sue on his lap. My cousin knocked on the window and waved but instead of coming to the door, he threw Sue off his lap and started yelling. Sue ran off and hid under a table. Then my grandpa came to the door and let my cousin in. “What are you doing?” she asked. “Nothing,” he said. “Are you just here by yourself?” she asked. “Yep, nobody’s here,” he said. She came in and stayed for about twenty minutes, during which time she could see Sue’s feet sticking out from under the table.
My mother and I went to visit my grandmother at her assisted living facility. I told my grandma about how I had recently quit my job. Her response was, “Don’t worry, I know you’ll find something. In fact, you’re so pretty, I think you could make some money posing for photos … you know … with your clothes off.”

Cecilia
Chicago, Illinois
When I was younger I took a lot of road trips with my grandparents, always sitting on the armrest between the two of them in the front seat. They always listened to KMA, the local farm news station. One day, when I was about eight or nine years old, they must have felt generous and let me listen to “my station.” After a few seconds of commercials, the first song came on. It was “I Want Your Sex” by George Michael. Even worse was the fact that they didn’t turn the station, so I had approximately four full minutes of complete torture.

Sara
Glenwood, Iowa
Here is one of my grandmother’s midnight e-mails:

The twins started their state playoffs on Monday at 6:00 P.M. They won. Played again on Tuesday at 6:00 P.M. They won. Played again on Wednesday at 6:00 P.M. They won. Played again on Thursday at 6:00 P.M. They lost. Played again on Thursday at 8:00 P.M. They won by one run. They will play again on Friday at 6:00 P.M. They will play Richards, which is the team that beat them 25-3. The team that beats will win first place and the other team will win second. Never dreamed they would do so well. I have not gone to the games because of the heat and I get too nervous. Tomorrow night, Brad is going and I am also going. I will take along three nerve pills. Hope I make it. The only casualty has been Alice, who plays first base, and was hit in the mouth trying to make a catch. Just a little blood and swelling. She was worried about her permanent teeth getting knocked loose. She is fine.

Anonymous
The Relatives

Technically, they’re blood. They go by the friendly names of Uncle Jack, Aunt Rita, and Cousin Mark. We’re told we’re related to them and we accept it as fact because, after all, if they’re showing up at the same family gatherings as we are, then they must be family. But when it comes right down to it, we must ask ourselves ... who the hell are these people?

We see them only a few times a year. We’re not really sure what they do, where they live, or how old they are. We try to make the best of it at family get-togethers and humor our uncle by watching his half-decent coin trick and listen to our aunt recount every detail of her fascinating trip to Colonial Williamsburg. As for the cousins, we’re inevitably thrust into forced playtime, stiff photo sessions, and awkward silences at the kids’ table.

And when it’s all over and we return home with the family we can keep track of, we’re not sure we know these other folks any better than we did before, but we’re sure glad they’re around to keep things interesting.
Uncle Bill is going through a rough breakup right now.
Aunt Mary passes along her extensive knowledge of crime scenes.
They’re related to us and around the same age, so it’s no wonder why we become instant BFF’s.
Memories of hanging with Aunt Tessa.
These cousins decided to opt out of the slow dances.
Pets

Pets are often considered to be the favorite member of the family. They are there for all of our highs and lows, witness all of our strange habits, and never once judge us for them. They don’t talk back, don’t lie to us, and consistently make us feel like we’re the most important person in the world. So, why, you may ask, is there an awkward chapter about them?

Well, because it isn’t the pets who are awkward. It’s us! That’s right. We’re the ones who are guilty of dressing them in booties, bow ties, and sweaters, talking to them in a baby voice, and proudly giving them names that begin with Miss, Mister, and Li’l. We put them on gluten-free diets, hang a stocking for them at Christmas, and enter them into beauty competitions. Yes, we’ll pretty much do anything for our pets because we love them so much, even though all they’re really looking for is a little attention, a walk, a cuddle here and there, and a chance to chase a squirrel. So, the next time we find ourselves taking a pet into therapy because we are convinced they’ve got an emotional issue to resolve, we should remember that we’re the crazy ones.
Not everybody was thrilled with their position in the family.
HERE, KITTY-KITTY

Aspiring “crazy cat ladies.”
We may be a lot closer than we think …
WHAT ABOUT ME?

Looks like Miss Muffet has been feeling a little left out lately.
Some families decide to forgo the traditional dog or cat and adopt a more unconventional animal companion. That doesn’t mean they love their not-so-cuddly creatures any less.
It starts with the best of intentions. Mom and Dad, feeling that the family needs to spend more time together, decide that we should take a vacation.

Reluctantly, we load up the family wagon and depart for our destination. As our parents break into song, asking us to join in for a group sing-along, we are faced with the harsh realization that this vacation is going to be far, far worse than we feared. When we arrive at the hotel, all we want to do is hang out by the pool, but instead we have to follow Dad, who is covered in too much suntan lotion (even though it’s cloudy) and repeatedly gets lost as he tries to keep up with his strict itinerary of landmarks we couldn’t care less about. All of which is documented in staged photo ops, where we’re told to look like we’re having the time of our lives—not an easy task when you’re standing in front of the National Archives. And as the vacation continues and we fight with our siblings for the bed near the window, eat at restaurants where the waiters are dressed like pirates, and witness Mom and Dad getting a little too tipsy, the only thing that gets us through the experience is knowing that if we can survive the next few days, we’ll be back in the sanctuary of our own home, where we can get some much-needed rest and relaxation from our vacation.
It’s the quality family time they’ve waited for all year.
Not everyone can handle the awesome power of Stonehenge.
THE LIFE AQUATIC

This resourceful dad wasn’t going to let a little rain spoil the vacation.
Theme parks look like they are the ultimate vacation destinations. With rides for all ages, mountains of sugary sweets, and spectacular shows, these magical kingdoms are so magical, they will take a happy family and have them cursing each other in less than an hour. Guaranteed.
Dad wore a bathing suit that would complement the color of his tan.
This young man decided the teacup ride was more his speed.
THE WALLFLOWER

Tessa picked the wrong day to wear green.
Sometimes the background is enough.
Nothing says “tropical paradise” like returning home with a souvenir photo of you and your family being swarmed by wild parrots.
Even the railing felt this one was uncomfortable.
My youngest daughter doesn’t fare so well with long airplane rides. One year, we traveled to Paris on Christmas Day, and visited the Eiffel Tower. Once we got down, between the cold and the fact that we’d just gotten off of the plane, my daughter had to vomit. My older daughter thought it was funny, so she decided to take the picture while her sister was getting sick. And my husband and I just decided, oh well, we might as well smile!

The Burns Family
Glen Head, New York
This picture is from a family trip to Disney World in 1985, right before my parents divorced. Everyone had issues at the time. I (the oldest on the left) was back for the summer after my first year at college and was resenting my temporary loss of newfound freedom (note the finger). Mom had been away “studying French” in the South of France with youngest son Ryan (far right). That left Dad alone with middle son Rob (second from left), who had the misfortune of being in high school during the peak of the New Wave fad. This trip to Disney World was an effort to have a “normal family vacation.”

After we flew across the country and felt jet-lagged, Dad tried to take a family picture. After several failed attempts, he screamed, “Can’t I get one picture, just one, without everyone screwing around?!”

Anonymous
The car originally belonged to my grandmother and she passed it down to my father. Shortly after, my dad had a wreck, but being the frugal man he is, he decided that the car drove just fine and didn’t look bad on the driver’s side. When this picture was taken my mom, dad, grandmother, aunt, cousins, myself, and several dogs were on our way to Galveston, Texas. To make the summer road trip more comfortable for everyone, my parents never used the air conditioner.

The Carpenter and Horton Family
Arlington, Texas
Most of these are of my mom, brother, and me because my dad is taking the photo. He usually takes several billion per trip. Our family vacations are very rigorous; everything is planned to the last detail and it’s all sightseeing, which makes it very tiring for the rest of us. Not him. Even when we are about to collapse on a national monument or castle from the Middle Ages, he marches on.

Lia
Palo Alto, California
This family is just plain giddy about falling to their death.
THE SAVE

Whatever you do, do not drop the dog. We repeat. Do not drop the dog.
When I was ten years old, my parents took us on vacation to a water park. I told my dad I had to go to the bathroom; he pointed to a building and let me go in by myself. When I got in, I noticed there were no urinals, and none of the stalls had toilets in them. Confused, I went into a stall anyway, pulled the curtain closed behind me, and did my business all over the floor. When I got out, we started walking away when another man with his son asked my dad if we knew of any bathrooms nearby. My dad pointed to the building that I had just exited. The man said, “No, that’s just a dressing room to change in and out of bathing suits.” My dad said that was not true, as I had just used the bathroom in there. The other man insisted and my father started to get angry: “Are you calling my son a liar?” My dad told the man we would all go in together to prove my innocence. Despite my objections, the four of us went in, and when my dad whipped open the curtain to the first stall ...

Kevin
North Smithfield, Rhode Island
When I was a teenager, my family went to Philadelphia to tour the sights. My dad decided to wear bright yellow pants with a red and yellow Hawaiian shirt that day, so he looked like a total tourist. I was already embarrassed by what he was wearing, but then he ramped it up a notch. After listening to a tour guide explain the history of the Liberty Bell, my father raised his hand and said, “Excuse me, miss, your bell has a crack in it.”

Crickets.

Suey
Lexington, Kentucky
My family took a two-week camping trip to the Grand Canyon when I was ten. After packing up the wood-grain station wagon, my parents, older sister, the family dog, and myself climbed into the car. As my dad was backing out of the camping site, he backed into a ditch where big clumps of grass became stuck in the bumper. When we hit the border of Arizona, the toll guy asked us if we were transporting any fruit over the border, and my dad replied, “No, but we have a little grass in the back.”

Teri
Westbrook, Maine
On a trip to the Baseball Hall of Fame in Cooperstown, New York, my two brothers and I slept on three small fold-out cots wedged side by side in the middle of our hotel room. I was nine, my brother David was seven, and my youngest brother, Andy, was four. One morning, David awoke to find his sheets soaked in urine. Embarrassed that he’d wet his bed, he sheepishly woke our parents in the next room. Our mom proceeded to clean him up, only to discover that although his pj’s were damp (and his sheets soaked), his underwear was mysteriously dry. This was impossible, of course, and so we racked our brains, trying to make sense of this anomaly … when we noticed Andy sitting Indian-style on his dry cot, grinning, a damp patch at the front of his pajamas. It didn’t take an Encyclopedia Brown to piece it together. In the middle of the night, Andy had rolled onto David’s cot, peed with abandon, then rolled back onto his own cot for a dry night’s sleep.

Mark
Mount Kisco, New York
Birthdays

We wait an entire year for the one day that is all about us. Our parents can’t get angry with us and our siblings can’t put us in a headlock. Instead, they must treat us like royalty, shower us with gifts, and wait to have a piece of cake until we’ve been served. In theory, it’s the most awesome day of the year and so we plan for it months in advance, put together our guest list, and fantasize about the closest thing we can imagine to nirvana. Then the big day arrives …

… and we quickly discover that the fantasy is just a fantasy. We wake to calls from distant relatives singing off-key renditions of “Happy Birthday to You.” Our siblings, who we were sure would honor the truce, sabotage our special day by sticking their fingers in the cake before we’ve been served. We are forced to open a stack of corny birthday cards, and end up with boxes of clothes we’ll never wear. And in the ultimate violation of birthday law, our parents find a public moment to let us know that we’re being “a pain in the butt.” One big letdown after another, and we vow to ourselves never to celebrate another birthday again—that is, until next year. Only 364 days to go …
Another “boring” b-day moment brought to you by Chuck E. Cheese!
Shauna had to make some last-minute cuts to the guest list.
I remember that I was tired. I had been under the coffee table for a good half-hour before I decided to come out. My uncle was attempting to cheer me up with a sparkler. This only worsened my mood. Also, the cake was sub-par.

Autumn
Ottawa, Ontario
Our last name is Nightingale and my dad is a big fan of the pun. This combination led to a memorable birthday cake on my ninth birthday.

Matt
Tulsa, Oklahoma
This is the card that my mom and dad gave me. They were obviously very busy with planning the party and all the “Happy Birthday Daughter” cards were sold out. I asked my mom what she was thinking when she did it … she has never given me a straight answer.

Jessica
San Antonio, Texas
When I show this picture to people, I describe it as the picture that defines my childhood. My brother was always goofing off and trying to be the center of attention, even on my birthday. He just had to upstage my pink plastic Corvette, and all I could do was glare. I spent many years doing that.

Stephanie
Wilsonville, Oregon
Apparently, turning sixteen means that you can light up more than just the candles.
The older we get, the more awkward our special day becomes. Our kids get into epic fights, the cakes get fruitier, and our only wish is that everyone stops blowing the damn party favors.
Graduation is a bittersweet time in our lives. On the one hand, we’re excited to have passed our final exams and achieved a major milestone. On the other, we are moving on to the next stage of life. Whether we’re transitioning from high school to college or college to the real world, we’re at a crossroads, we’re confused, and we have a lot of new decisions to make. But even with all of that pressure as we stand in our cap and gown, there’s something else that stresses us out even more.

For the first time in four years, our entire family has invaded our home away from home—our “safe zone,” where we are surrounded by friends and free from the awkward bondage of family. But with a familiar honk, the car that we spent a childhood fighting in pulls into the school parking lot and we see them approaching: our parents and grandparents wearing shirts with “I Kissed the Graduate” monogrammed in huge letters across their chests, and our pissed-off siblings, who blame us for being dragged there to sit in plastic folding chairs and listen to some contrived speech about “changing the world.” We realize that despite our accomplishments, our families are one institution that we will never be able to graduate from.
A WARM EMBRACE

CJ was finally able to get the acceptance she was looking for from Dad.
He would always look back on that special year and think, “What if?”
It’s our special day and our siblings are just so excited to be there to share it with us.
This graduate is determined not to be another face in the crowd.
This is my father and me at my eighth-grade graduation. I was attending a college-prep school and he was meandering through life as a full-time hippie.

Greg
Ann Arbor, Michigan
My mom dressed me for graduation in a powder blue suit and pointy white Capezio shoes. She thought I looked really stylish and wanted to keep taking photos. All I could think about was getting home and taking off my *Saturday Night Fever* special.

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Chris

Los Angeles, California
My parents had a contentious marriage and divorced when I was five. My mom always had a habit of airing dirty laundry during family get-togethers, so after the divorce, my parents rigorously avoided each other. My dad married my stepmother when I was eleven. This picture was taken when I was twenty-four, and I think my graduation dinner marked the first time my parents and stepmother ever intentionally made plans to eat a meal together. At the point the picture was taken, the college still hadn’t decided if graduation was going to be held outside or in the gym (there was a light sprinkle that day). We were all running around campus trying to figure out where we were supposed to be as it intermittently rained on us. I’m not sure who decided to take the picture, but my sister made sure she was behind the camera.

Victoria
East Longmeadow, Massachusetts
It’s one of the most important days of our lives, so no wonder it is filled with anticipation and excitement. We’re not talking about the happy couple sharing romantic vows and declaring eternal love for each other. We’re of course referring to the real drama of any marriage—the joining together of the happy couple’s families. And in case we were wondering how that was going to turn out, perhaps we got a hint during the wedding planning, when the two families disagreed over who was paying for everything, how many guests each side could invite, and whether our cousin really needed to sit at the head table.

And the results rarely disappoint: parents getting a little tipsy and delivering sloppy toasts, normally restrained relatives letting loose on the dance floor, and in-laws engaging in passive-aggressive conversations, planting the seeds of conflict that will fully blossom a few years later. As for the happy couple themselves, they’re too busy posing for photographs with relatives they never knew existed, nervously performing an overly choreographed first dance, and smearing cake all over each other’s faces to realize that from this day forward, every family gathering just became twice as awkward as it was before.
Nobody will ever spot these inconspicuous newlyweds.
The dress at this wedding was Starfleet optional.
Dropping to one knee to ask your partner to spend the rest of your lives together may feel sufficiently romantic for most of us, but apparently this display of love and commitment just isn’t enough for everyone.
GETTING AN EARFUL

They aren’t just for whispering sweet nothings.
Things only got worse when Heidi showed up for the honeymoon.
When my husband and I first became engaged, we went over to his mother’s house to make the announcement official. We walked into the living room; his arm was around my shoulder, and she was sitting on the sofa. He said, “Mom, we’re getting married!” She lowered her reading glasses; she looked at her son; she looked at me; she looked back at her son and replied, “Oh, really? To whom?”

Lynda

Billings, Montana
It was the rehearsal dinner the night before my wedding. One of my bridesmaids, who is one of my dearest, oldest friends, had lost a considerable amount of weight before the wedding and we were all telling her how great she looked. Then my husband-to-be’s aunt sidled up next to her at the bar, where she and my maid of honor were ordering beers. The aunt looked over at my bridesmaid. “So, you pregnant or just had a big dinner?”

Nicolle
Longmont, Colorado
My in-laws had been divorced for over twenty years at the time when my husband and I decided to get married, so they had limited contact while my husband was growing up. The morning of our wedding my father-in-law, his other children, and his current wife arrived at the church and began introducing themselves to other family members. He promptly went up to a woman standing near me and said, “Hi, you must be Janet’s mother. So, nice to meet you,” to the horror of all who were there. Once the shock wore off, she responded, “No, I’m Bonnie, your ex-wife.”

Mackenzie
Provo, Utah
The most embarrassing moment of my wedding wasn’t when the piano player continued to play the wedding march after I had stood at the end of the aisle for over five minutes. It was during the reception, when it was time to “shoot” the garter. My husband, having no idea what to do, did not wait for a group of young, single men to gather. He just took the garter off and proceeded to shoot it at a table of dining guests. The young ring bearer, seeing where it landed, picked it up and ran off with it. This didn’t bode well for the rest of the single men at the wedding, and now an eight-year-old has my garter.  

Megan  
San Marcos, Texas
The morning after my wedding, the wedding party and family and friends were all checking out of the hotel. My father, fresh out of the shower, looked out the window and saw his friend in the parking lot below. As a joke, he knocked on the window to get his friend's attention. Unfortunately, his friend didn't hear him, but my bridesmaid, Tracy, heard it as she walked out of the hotel and looked up to see my father standing naked in the window, banging on the glass as if he was trying to get her to look.

Karen
Los Angeles, California
The parents of the bride showing their support for each other’s forearms.
AIR SAX

What guy doesn’t dream of rocking out on a woodwind?
Holidays

Holidays make everyone in the family go a little nuts. Maybe it’s the pressure of getting to the Easter egg hunt on time, the dilemma of finding the perfect Halloween costume, the stress of preparing the annual Thanksgiving feast, or the anticipation of finding out what’s under the Christmas tree. In the name of holiday spirit, we spend an entire day endeavoring to turn a simple chicken egg into a masterful work of art, or wear costumes made by Mom and Dad, who swear to us that being a construction-paper tube of toothpaste will make us the envy of all the kids in the neighborhood. We dress up as Pilgrims and Indians and reenact the most unrealistic version of the first Thanksgiving ever. We find ourselves carrying candles and parading around the neighborhood singing songs about figgy pudding to strangers. But as ridiculous as holidays and their traditions may be, at least the whole family suffers together.
AFP Essential: Oversized props.
EASTER’S FINEST

Open to interpretation.
Frightening children has long been the mall Santa’s domain, but AFP would like to recognize another awkwardly intimidating holiday mascot: The Easter Bunny. Take a cute, cuddly creature with buck teeth and a big smile, blow it up to giant, freakish proportions, and you’ve got all the ingredients you need to seriously traumatize a child.
Dad was determined not to get egged this year.
This young lady was the only elderly Smokey the Bear in the neighborhood.
Sometimes we forget Halloween is about the children.
The coolest costumes aren’t always store-bought.
Don't hate him because he's a beautiful baster.
Hasn’t the turkey suffered enough humiliation?
This is what happens when you wait all year for a freaking Mr. Coffee.
He just got a lot more real.
A reminder to us all to shake responsibly this holiday season.
This young lady took some creative license with her drawing of a snowman.
Me (left) and my sister, dressed up as doilies for Easter. We have naturally very straight hair and these perms were a disaster.

Dorothy and Nancy
Atlanta, Georgia
My dad made the costumes that year, and he felt pretty confident in his abilities. He just laid me out on the ground and traced around me, then cut out the fabric and sewed it together. Unfortunately, he’d neglected to consider how I’d go about lifting my arms.

Shannon
Calgary, Canada
It was my mom’s idea for everyone to dress up. We all protested, which is why it looks like we’ve thrown back a few.

Oscar
San Pedro, California
My grandma is notorious for giving bad gifts.
My dad thought it would be fun to collect giant nutcrackers. So, for three years in a row, he bought a six-foot nutcracker from Costco.

The Daniels Family
Bloomfield Hills, Michigan
GIFT WRAPPED

Give the re-gift of family.
When Bethany woke up, she didn’t expect to see a full moon.
Eat your heart out, Christmas tree.
As a kid, I took Halloween very seriously. Every year, I would return from a long night of trick-or-treating and immediately begin itemizing my loot by putting them into different shoeboxes labeled with the name of the candy. And every year, my father would find the box labeled “Milky Way” and clean me out when I wasn’t standing guard. One Halloween, I decided to get smart and I labeled the Milky Way box “Mike and Ike,” knowing that he hated Mike and Ikes. I came home from school the next day to find Dad with his hand in the Mike and Ike box and caramel and nougat all over his face. So much for my genius plan.

Garrett
Florham Park, New Jersey
My family has a tradition of everyone going around the Thanksgiving dinner table and saying what we’re thankful for. Usually, we talk about being thankful for our good health or something positive that might have happened that year, etc. But when it got to my precocious seven-year-old cousin, he stood up and announced that he wanted to thank the sperm he was conceived with for “coming in first.”

Gabe
Madison, Wisconsin
Thanksgiving 1996 was unusual, as my grandparents had both of their sons, both of their daughters-in-law, and all three of their granddaughters there. I was there with my husband. And my great-aunt Clara, my grandfather’s sister, was also attending. Clara, aged eighty-four, was the oldest of seven siblings. My uncle leaned over and said, “So, Clara. Do you have any memories of seven kids around the Thanksgiving table?” Aunt Clara replied, “Well, I’ll tell you about one Thanksgiving. I’d invited our brother Bob to come eat at my house. He didn’t come over, so I told my son to go over to his trailer because I knew something was wrong. And when he got there, Bob was sitting on the couch, dead.”

Amanda
Austin, Texas
About two years ago at Christmas, my aunt brought her new albino boyfriend home to meet the family. We decided to take a family photo with my little cousin’s Polaroid camera. Usually in the family of dark-skinned Italians, I’m the one who tends to stand out, since I have a lighter complexion. When the picture developed, we all hovered over to look and I said, “Let’s try to find the white face this year!” My mother then elbowed me and, realizing what I just said, I hung my head in shame.

Stephanie
Trenton, New Jersey
My family has learned not to expect much from my grandparents in terms of presents. One year, our family got an expired “gourmet” beefstick-and-cheese assortment. Another year, I unwrapped one gift to receive a keychain that my siblings and I instantly recognized as a McDonald’s Happy Meal toy; it was one that I had previously gotten during a visit to my grandparents and left at their house. Thanks for the regift.

Caroline
Greenwich, Connecticut
My dad’s mother, whom we called Meemaw, was the kind of old lady who enjoyed being able to say whatever the hell she was thinking. When I was a sophomore in college, my roommates and I, while traveling on spring break from our tiny one-stoplight town to LA, decided to go to Glamour Shots. My mother was so enamored of the resulting shots that she framed the eleven-by-fifteen for Meemaw’s “big” Christmas gift. My mother had endured Meemaw’s salty opinions of every Christmas gift she’d ever received, even from my two sisters and me as children, for thirty years—but this year Mom knew she had a winner. Christmas Day, Meemaw opened the box, lifted the tissue paper, and said, “I don’t want that. It doesn’t look anything like her.”

Meredith
San Diego, California
My British parents used to host an annual Boxing Day party here in Texas. It was a large open house–style party and very popular. Boxing Day in the UK is the day after Christmas. My father had gotten a purple martin condo (very tall, elaborate birdhouse) for Christmas, and he was so excited that he wanted to put it up right away to have it ready for the purple martin nesting season in the spring. While my mother took care of the guests at the party, he worked on getting the martin house and its pulley system working—it required hoisting with a rope far up into the air to sit high on a post. Before the final step in setting up the bird condo, he came into the house, walked into the living room, and announced very loudly to the large group of guests gathered there, “Who wants to see an erection?”
One year, my family was hosting Christmas and we had a ton of relatives coming over for dinner. My brother and I were both in college and completely broke. We didn’t have enough money to buy anyone presents, so we decided to rummage through the house a few hours before dinner for gag gifts.

During dinner, my brother and I give out our gag gifts. We’re all having a good laugh when my mom says, “Oh, wait, there’s one more for me!” I’m looking at the gift and thinking, “I don’t remember wrapping anything for Mom.” She unwraps the present, holds up a Lucite framed Nativity scene, and says, “Oh my God! This is hilarious! How gaudy!” And just as we’re all about to join her in laughter, my sister’s new boyfriend, Andrew, pipes up for the first time and says, “Actually, that’s from me.”

Ivana
San Francisco, California
Of the thousands of awkward photos we’ve received, there were a few that were, well, a little different. They often left us confused, sometimes scared, and always wondering what the hell was going on. At first, we didn’t know what to do with them, so we filed them away. But that didn’t last for long, because we couldn’t stop thinking about them. So we took a second look and ultimately realized that oddness was also something worth celebrating.
While this dad was trying to teach his daughter a valuable lesson, this actually does nothing for the environment.
Never ash on Grandma.
Some people run the sink. This gentleman responds to Tchaikovsky.
HAY SEASON IN LATVIA

A very rare case of farmer’s ax tan.
We think Amanda summed it up best: “This is me. And a tiger. In a shopping mall.”
Has anybody seen Aunt Telcia?
Bonus Chapter
MALCOLM NOT QUITE IN THE MIDDLE

Some people just have to be the off-center of attention.
Circumstances like these only encourage mom to be more of a backseat driver.
This father is always there to support his daughter.
THE FALL GIRL

Even though she jumped the gun on the dismount, Mom still nailed the smile.
Sometimes we need a gentle reminder from sis to let us know when it’s time to let go.
TWISTED SISTER

No, she’s not mad at her. She loves her. See?
AFP Rule #65: Growth spurts. And lack of growth spurts.
Finally, something these sisters could agree on.
THE BACK-TO-BACK

For the sibling pair who can stand to look like each other but can’t stand to look at each other.
FOREHIDDEN

Guess who spent more time in the bathroom?
From now on, they’ll remember to call Grandma more often.
SO FRESH AND SO CLEAN

It’s a love of spa treatments that keeps these cuzzes so close.
This man takes an opportunity to show everyone back at the office just how relaxed he was on the cruise.
Awkward Rule #72: Performing in the resort talent show.
ON THE ROAD AGAIN

These two decided to take the express tour of the Windy City.
This young man has just developed a new fear … of Dad’s itineraries.
It appears that everyone objects at this wedding ceremony.
Someone had prematurely begun her Easter egg hunt.
SMELLS LIKE HOLIDAY SPIRIT

Shortly after taking this photo, the dog converted.
THE UNENCHANTED FOREST

Nothing brings out the love quite like the beauty of nature.
SANTA'S LITTLE HELPER

Jolly St. Nick wanted no part of this one.
This family asked for a backdrop that would bring out their personality.
THE GREAT DEPRESSION

What kid doesn’t go nuts for the Roaring Twenties?
Unfortunately, the hand-clasp never caught on.
They did it for the nookie.
Photo Credit

Dan Smith;
Alexandra Lubman, New York, NY;
Beckie Szmania, Milwaukee, WI;
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The Boyer Family, Lebanon, PA;
Bernadette Ojenda;
The Frozena Kids;
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The Whitt Family, Cincinnati, OH;
The Hickey Sisters, Naperville, IL;
Chloe D, Norwell, MA;
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The Toney Family, Canton, GA;
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The Wright Family, Waterloo, ON;
Carson Webb, Lafayette, LA;
Adam Stark, Des Moines, IA, via Muscatine, IA;
Elizabeth Esry;
Don Speice, Westerly, RI;
Jon and Jeff Heckel
Imagine if family were perfect. Our parents would be cool, reasonable, and incapable of saying anything that might embarrass us. Our siblings would be our biggest fans, let us control the remote, and always give us first dibs on everything. Our grandparents would sit away from the steering wheel, eat dinner at night, and wear sunglasses that actually fit the shape of their faces. Our cousins would be instant best friends. Our relatives would wear name tags and never have too much to drink. There would never be another awkward silence, awkward conversation, or awkward moment. Well, we must ask ourselves ... is that what we really want?

Yes, probably. But let’s face it—that’s never going to happen! So we have no choice but to embrace it, and once we do, we might come to realize that the family that makes us so unbearably uncomfortable is also the same family that makes us laugh, makes us proud, and makes us feel loved. And that’s something we can all take comfort in.
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MIKE BENDER is a screenwriter whose credits include Not Another Teen Movie and the MTV Movie Awards. He had to fish himself out of that white cardigan.

DOUG CHERNACK has created and produced television shows for E, Fox Sports, and The Golf Channel. He is still a sucker for gold jewelry and short shorts.
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