

Dear Friends,

December, 1998

With the death of Geoff's father in May of 1997, we became worried that there would be nobody to carry on the dull and humorless tradition of Kuenning Christmas letters. After a heated discussion between the three sons, however, Geoff has unilaterally decided that since he is the unfunniest, he will henceforth bore you with recitations of family news.

One of our goals this year was to singlehandedly keep the Post Office in business. To this end, Geoff sent out job applications to a few carefully selected colleges and universities, namely all those that had an opening. Did you know that the University of Eastern Bangladesh has a computer science department? It's a nice place, too: nestled high in the Himalayas, they teach on a ratty old abacus because their only Apple II froze up.

Far more important than getting a job, however, was another task that involved a lot of copying and mailing. Yes, I'm talking about doing income taxes. But when we weren't trying to figure out clever ways to bamboozle the IRS (of *course* Geoff's trip to France was charitable!), we also found time to pursue our dream of adopting a baby.

You may be thinking that adoption is a lot of paperwork and hassle, ending with a long waiting list and hostile social workers. You're wrong. Adoption is a lot of paperwork, hassle, photographing, writing, gluing, mailing, and searching, and at the end you don't even go on a waiting list. The process works something like this:

You decide you want to adopt, and get in touch with an agency that some friends used. A very persuasive person convinces you that you'll get a beautiful baby in no time, and you write the agency a check for approximately half the national debt. And indeed, in no time at all you find yourself being fingerprinted, tested for tuberculosis, getting copies of dusty old certificates, filling out endless forms, and explaining to an officer that no, you really weren't planning to break in to Sly Stallone's mansion, you just wanted the birthmother to see a picture of you in a nicer back yard. Then comes a visit by a social worker who arrives carrying an electron microscope, which she uses to make sure your house is antiseptic, and either a safecracking kit for testing your child-proof locks, or the practical equivalent, a toddler.

Once you have finished all the paperwork, you get to write the "birthmother letter." This is a deathless bit of prose that explains to a pregnant woman exactly why she should give up her baby to a couple of strangers whom she's never met, will probably never be heard from again, and quite possibly may be planning to enslave the poor child and ship it off to Bangladesh.

Writing the birthmother letter is lots of fun. We would sit on the couch with a laptop computer, lovingly discussing such issues as whether it was more important to describe the nursery or the back yard, or whether the adjective "rash" was appropriate to describe Geoff's decision to become a professor. We learned many things from this experience, such as the fact that laptop computers stop working when you throw them at the wall while shouting "I don't *care* if I ended the sentence with a preposition!"

After we finished writing the letter, we got to glue 4 photographs onto each of 200 copies of the thing. The agency suggests using real photos, not a color printer, so that the birthmothers can judge the prospective parents' ability to line things up, color within the lines, and keep glue from getting all over their clothes. This will be important in later years when we do crafts projects with the baby.

The completed letter then goes on file and the waiting begins. Whenever a new birthmother shows up, the agency sends out all the letters and she carefully picks her preferred couple, based on criteria such as common interests, religion, and whether they ended their sentences with prepositions. It typically takes from six months to a year to find a "match." In the interim, the eager couple demonstrates their patience through behaviors such as racing to answer every phone call, chewing their fingernails, and arguing about whether they should retouch the photos to hide Geoff's expanding bald spot.

At the same time, though, Geoff was starting to get phone calls from universities interested in individuals with such exceptional qualifications as possessing a piece of parchment and breathing. During the spring, he got to go to interviews in exciting places like South Central LA, Northridge (site of the '94 quake), and Fullerton. Pat wisely stayed at home, hoping beyond hope that an offer would come in from Santa Cruz or at least Fresno.

The real fun started after the interviews were finished. Pat came home one Monday to find a message from young woman who had liked our letter. She called back that evening, and after Geoff convinced her that all the grammatical errors were the fault of the printer, Pat got on the phone and really hit it off with her. The next day, we learned that she had chosen us to be the parents of her baby. We celebrated by going out to dinner and practicing diapering a teddy bear, which made the other people in the restaurant look at us very strangely.

The following Saturday, Alexandra Caitlin Renee Kuenning was born. Our "pregnancy" had lasted five days, during which Pat had made up for lost time by practicing heavy breathing daily and eating pickles and ice cream whenever she got the chance. The new baby's first action was to grab the doctor's stethoscope, launching what has become a career of snagging stuff she's not supposed to have.

With the new baby in tow, we went back to visit two of the most interesting places that had offered Geoff a job, the University of Arizona and Harvey Mudd College. Both had made attractive offers, but they were quite different in character. U of A flew the three of us to Tucson, put us up in a \$300/night hotel suite, and treated us to a gourmet dinner. Harvey Mudd had us drive over for the day and fed us takeout Persian food in a professor's kitchen. Naturally, we were more impressed by the latter treatment, especially when the professor's kid spit up all over Pat, so after much agonizing, Geoff took the job at Harvey Mudd.

Fortunately, the rest of the year wasn't quite so eventful as those first four months. We bought a nice little house in Claremont, walking distance from the college, and Pat quit her job so she could take care of Xandie full-time. Some very nice professionals took care of moving us ("Where would you like this piano? Oh, and where should I put the refrigerator I've got in my other hand?"), and Geoff jumped right in to the task of teaching young geniuses exactly how to program a computer (late at night works best). Pat is doing some substitute teaching, and Xandie has started part-time day care so that she will be able to bring home the full gamut of winter diseases.

We are all happy and healthy and well settled, and hope you are the same.

Love,

Pat, Geoff, and Xandie