

Dear friends and family,

I would like to dedicate this year's letter to the memory of my best friend, Dave Bozman. Many of you knew Dave; others will remember him as the man who performed our wedding. Among other things, Dave taught me to believe in my ability to do what I'd never attempted; without him the following story would have never have come to pass. His death has left a huge hole in all our lives.

When we moved into our house five years ago, our back yard was literally a weed patch. Since then, Pat has worked magic. She has planted trees, re-seeded the lawn, replaced flowers, installed lanterns, hired little fairies to sprinkle dew, and encouraged butterflies to make their home in what became a showpiece. And that was just the first month. *Sunset* was going to do a spread on us, but the Butchart gardens in Victoria, Canada brought suit, saying that she was making them look bad because they only had a budget of \$30 million. (To be fair, that's in Canadian dollars, which are sort of like play money only less valuable.)

Anyway, Pat had one of those Big Birthdays this year. You know the sort: the ones where men blow money on big machines that make lots of noise, pollute the air, and don't do anything particularly useful, while women suddenly develop an affinity for the digit "9".

As it happens, I had a Big Birthday last year, and Pat figured out exactly the right present to give me to satisfy my Manly Gadget Need. That was really cool; it took me a full year to realize that this was just her ploy to ensure that I would reciprocate out of guilt.

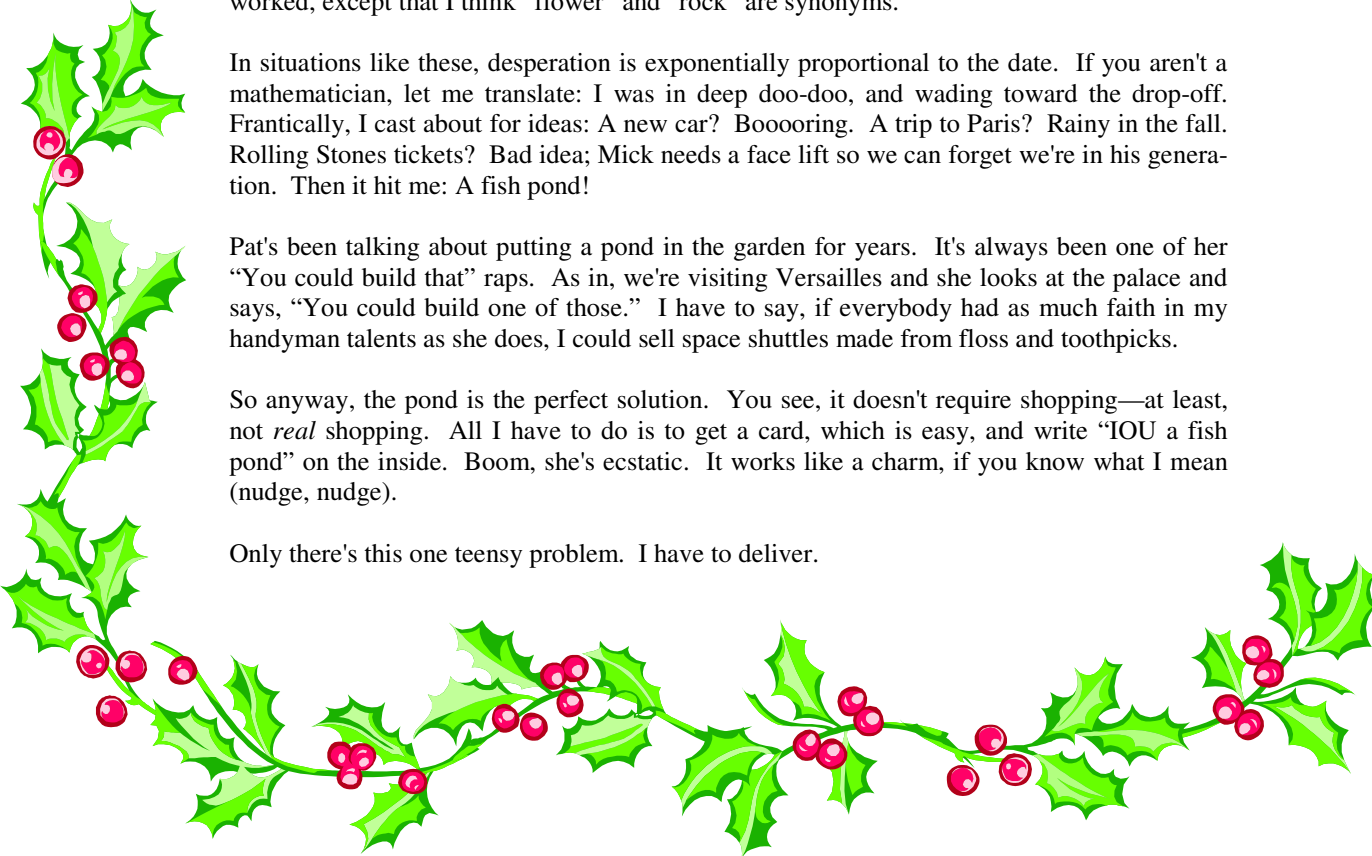
So the Big Day was approaching, and I was clueless. (OK, I'm *always* clueless—but did you really have to point that out?) One of the great joys of being an academic is that you get the summer off—but you pay for it by having absolutely no free time whatsoever during the school year. Naturally, it didn't occur to me that Pat's birthday was on its way until after classes started, which meant that I had no time to shop. Not that it would have mattered, since I also had no idea what I might buy her. Maybe something for the garden would have worked, except that I think "flower" and "rock" are synonyms.

In situations like these, desperation is exponentially proportional to the date. If you aren't a mathematician, let me translate: I was in deep doo-doo, and wading toward the drop-off. Frantically, I cast about for ideas: A new car? Booooring. A trip to Paris? Rainy in the fall. Rolling Stones tickets? Bad idea; Mick needs a face lift so we can forget we're in his generation. Then it hit me: A fish pond!

Pat's been talking about putting a pond in the garden for years. It's always been one of her "You could build that" raps. As in, we're visiting Versailles and she looks at the palace and says, "You could build one of those." I have to say, if everybody had as much faith in my handyman talents as she does, I could sell space shuttles made from floss and toothpicks.

So anyway, the pond is the perfect solution. You see, it doesn't require shopping—at least, not *real* shopping. All I have to do is to get a card, which is easy, and write "IOU a fish pond" on the inside. Boom, she's ecstatic. It works like a charm, if you know what I mean (nudge, nudge).

Only there's this one teensy problem. I have to deliver.



Guys, let me tell you this right now. If your wife ever wants you to build her a fish pond, just get a divorce. It's cheaper, it's less work, and you'll like each other better afterwards.

But not me. I'm nothing if not stupid. So with a big grin I say "Sure, we'll start digging this weekend."

Question: Do you know how much dirt there is in your average fish pond? Answer: None, you dummy. You have to take the stuff OUT, and then you have to CARRY it somewhere



else, and then you have to put ROCKS around the edge and mortar them down so they don't fall in the water and kill the stupid fish. Does that sound like a bit of heavy lifting? It is. Especially if you live in Claremont, where you have a million years of history where rocks fell down off the mountain into our yard and you can't dig down three millimeters without hitting a boulder the size of San Antonio.

Oh, and did I mention the electricity? Fish need something called oxygen in the water, which means a pump, which means electricity, which means...it's not anywhere near the house, folks. There weren't any wires back there. I had to put them in. Seventy-two feet deep, according to the city code (which they decided to change after I finished the work) unless the wires are encased in material sufficient to protect a nuclear reactor, the inspector comes on a Wednesday during the Leonid meteor shower, and your sister is a nun in Zimbabwe. Since I don't have a sister and Pat's sister isn't a nun, I just dug. And dug. And dug. Then I had to run conduit. Do you know about conduit? There are three kinds: plastic, light metal, and heavy metal. I recommend buying the heavy metal; that way when you go ballistic you won't be able to wrap it around your own neck.

Oh, yes, and then there were the tree roots. All the books say to give trees a wide berth. Like we had that choice (we're talking 60-year-old avocado trees). I had to go under the roots. Big, hairy roots. There was a plus side, though: I struck oil. Too bad it was Mazola.

Eventually, we finished the project. Pat did almost all of the digging for the pond itself, and laid those nice rocks around the side, and planted all the plants, and did practically everything that actually matters. Then she bought some fish and some tadpoles, and now she and Xandie sit out there every morning and watch them swim around. So do the neighborhood cats. They love our pond. I never realized how many cats live in Claremont. Most of our fish still live here, too.

So there you have it. Pat did the work. I did the complaining. And I get credit for giving her a great birthday present? Could life be better? Guys, you gotta try this.

I'll send you my lawyer's number.

Merry Christmas from all of us,

Geoff, on behalf of Pat and Xandie, who at this very moment are trying to shoo the cats away from the fish.

