

Dear Family and Friends,

December, 2006

Last year, when we were planning our annual Christmas letter, I suggested that we should write about our upcoming kitchen remodel. “No, no,” said Pat, “Let’s save that for next year, after it’s done. Find something else.” So if you were bored by last year’s letter, it’s entirely Pat’s fault. I had nothing to do with it. Not a bit.

This year, though, I get to write about something *really* interesting: power nailers.

Pat’s voice: “Um, Honey?”

“What?”

“Nobody cares about power nailers.”

“I do.”

“Write about the remodel. Or you’ll be eating beans for a year.”

Did I mention that we remodeled our kitchen?

In truth, that’s not quite accurate. We *started* to remodel our kitchen. It was to be a fairly simple 3-month project, involving gutting the kitchen, moving two exterior walls, pouring a new slab, replacing and extending the existing roof, replacing all the windows in the front, cutting two new doors, and constructing a full-scale model of the Eiffel tower.

Being careful sorts, we interviewed several contractors before settling on a nice young fellow who provided us with three references. Perhaps we should have been suspicious that they all had the same last name and lived in the same apartment building, but they uniformly assured us that the contractor had installed a showpiece kitchen in only two weeks.

Just to be sure, we also asked to visit an ongoing project similar to our own. The contractor explained that the only one he had at the moment was in Tibet, but we were welcome to visit as soon as the mother-in-law moved out, which was expected to happen in about three years.

Since he was obviously honest, we decided to forego the project visit and signed on the dotted line. Perhaps we should have paid more attention to the fine print in the paragraph just above, which stated that “All disputes will be mediated by Genghis Khan.”

Two days later, construction started when a bulldozer drove through the wall of Xandie’s room at 7 AM. Apologizing, the operator explained that he was a bit nearsighted, and started tearing out our much-hated “one-butt” kitchen. We moved the refrigerator and dining table into the living room, Pat set up house-keeping in the back yard with a “Deluxe Camp Kitchen” (translation: a Coleman stove and a cereal bowl), and we settled in for our two-week wait.

That was at the beginning of June. In July, the contractor delivered our custom cabinets. “Aren’t they beautiful?” he enthused as we stared in horror at the finish, which had apparently been applied by a crazed 3-year-old wielding a Marks-A-Lot. We sent them back for refinishing. Meanwhile, a maniacal A/C “expert” unhooked our air conditioner just as the hot weather set in.

On to August. The cabinets were delivered again. “Aren’t they beautiful?” gushed the contractor. This time I was firm. “No, you need to take them back again,” I insisted. He refused. “Don’t worry, we’ll fix it after they’re installed,” he assured me. Before I could blink, he had attached them to the walls. Unfortunately, they were five inches shorter than the wall they were designed for (I’m not making this up!). That’s how we wound up with an unusable broom closet where we don’t need one.

September arrived. By this time, we were way past the completion date, which meant that the contrac-



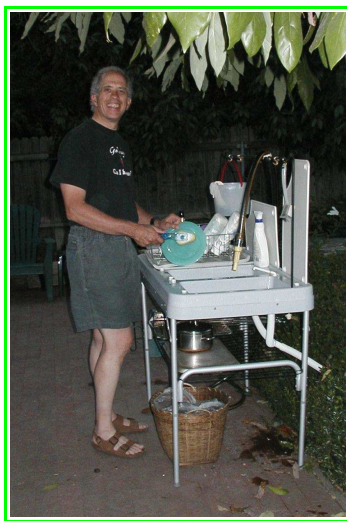
First day of construction

tor was required to “diligently prosecute the work” to get it done. By 2029. We could now reliably count on work crews to show up for at least four hours every month, without fail. Cold weather was coming, and cooking outdoors was getting kind of old. We suggested that perhaps more labor should be allocated to the job. The contractor explained that all his crews were in Tibet.

All summer long, Pat had been planning her “kitchen warming” party. It was now rescheduled as an “Octoberfest.” That was OK by me, since it would mean beer. I slipped the contractor a little extra on the side to arrange that he’d be done at the right time. I think that’s the money he used to buy the convertible Corvette truck. (I’m not making the truck up.)

October arrived. We now had drywall, and the remaining cabinets were sitting in our garage, but the drywall had to be painted first. To save money, the contractor used his own crew instead of hiring professionals. The first coat needed a little touch-up. Six coats later, October departed, still without cabinets.

“OK,” said Pat, ever the optimist, “we’ll have a kitchen-warming party for Thanksgiving.” The new island with the butcher-block top was installed. I came home, sat on a stool, and leaned my elbow on the counter. A loud “Crack!” warned me, and I barely avoided having it fall on my foot. “You weren’t supposed to *lean* on it!” protested the contractor. Back it went for regluing (I think they used Post-It glue) while the granite specialists came by.



The temporary kitchen

shoddy workmanship aren’t considered “construction defects” in the eyes of the law. Apparently, you don’t have a case unless the ceiling collapses and kills somebody. Even then, you have to spend \$37 million in legal fees. So all we need to do is invite an obnoxious neighbor over just when the roof starts creaking...

Anyway, despite all the kitchen troubles, our lives are actually good. Pat is having her usual problem with music students (i.e., everybody loves her so much that she’s overworked), Xandie is having a wonderful time with piano lessons, riding lessons, choir, reading, schoolwork, and general adorability, and I’m still working until 3 AM and sleeping until 4 (I’ll let you guess if that’s AM or PM).

In closing, though, I would like to make a modest suggestion. If Osama bin Laden is ever captured (probably around the same time we finish the kitchen), we shouldn’t execute him. We shouldn’t torture him. We shouldn’t even prosecute him. We’ll just offer him a kitchen remodel, at U.S. Government expense.

We have a contractor we can recommend...

Love,

Geoff Pat Xandie



Pat doing demolition

Pat and I watched the granite installers do their job. It was pretty impressive, if you’re impressed by amateurism. The best part was when they lined up the hole for the cooktop with the backsplash beneath the range hood. Except I should say “tried to line up,” because it turns out that the contractor had made another slight measurement error, so that the range hood was actually mounted over the refrigerator. The granite people did a nice job of covering up the mistake, though. You can only spot the problem if you’re closer than a thousand yards away.

Just before Thanksgiving, Pat put her foot down. “I’m having people over for dinner, and I want a damn kitchen to cook in!” she said. They offered to put her up in a cheap Nevada motel with kitchenettes, but she declined when she saw the herd of cockroaches. So they put out a superhuman effort (which, for them, meant that they actually worked *six* hours in two days) and came up with a functional kitchen—if “functional” means “half the drawers and all the handles are missing.” And as an extra-special bonus, they filled a 1-liter Arrowhead water bottle with clear solvent and left it on the counter for Pat to find when she came home. (Sadly, I’m not making this up either, but she only took one mouthful and didn’t swallow any.)

That was the last straw; we finally did something smart and fired them. It was only then that we found out the sneaky secret of all contractors: incompetence and



Xandie in choir concert