

Dear Family and Friends,

December, 2007

One of the great imperatives of American citizenship is the need—nay, the requirement—to spend money frivolously. Any presidential candidate worth his (or her—sorry, Hillary!) salt will tell you that if you don't run down to the mall and plunk down hundreds of thousands of dollars for things you don't need, the Bad Guys will win.

Pat and I have taken this assignment to heart. (I am sorry to report that Xandie is not following in our footsteps; she seems to be happy with a library card and \$3 worth of plastic dolls. But I'm hoping that when she reaches junior high, she will at least start coveting an expensive pair of sneakers.)

Last year, as we reported to you, we initiated a disastrous kitchen remodel. This year, we are pleased to have contributed \$1.3 million in legal fees to the economy, not to mention the \$2.7 million we paid to the “sure, we can fix anything” second contractor. We now have a showpiece kitchen, although the range has only one working burner, the refrigerator's average temperature is 68°, and the sink drains directly onto the floor. But we were featured in *Gorgeous Kitchens* for *Idiots Magazine*, and what more could one ask?



In the new kitchen



**Inspiration for our
back-yard project**

However, once the kitchen remodel was done, we started feeling like we weren't doing our job as red-blooded Americans. Surely there was some other way to help the economy? We briefly considered backdating some stock options, but decided that was passé. Instead, we decided that the best way to recover from a painful kitchen remodel was... a painful back-yard remodel!

I should have realized something was up when Pat pulled out her sketchbook. (Note to husbands: if your wife buys a sketchbook, sneak out of bed and replace it with an Improvised Explosive Device. It'll be safer.) The next thing I knew, three different contractors were traipsing around the yard, spouting arcane technical terms like “back-flushed precipitation seepage aquifer” and “rhododendron.” Since we had learned our lesson well the previous time (“Low bidders are going to go bankrupt on you”), we chose the highest bidder. \$324,987 later, we had 37 new bricks in our patio, and Pat was happy with the view out the back window.

Not to be outdone in the Support America First campaign, I decided to go out and purchase a Manly Mechanical Device. However, since internal combustion engines are apparently bad for the world, I settled for a tandem bicycle. For me, there was something appealing about that whole “Daisy, Daisy” thing. Since Pat was far too intelligent to trust my driving, I was then stuck with convincing Xandie that “it would be lots of fun” to stare at my butt for hours on end while pedaling like crazy and having no control over where we went.

That's when we realized that her legs were a bit too short for an adult-sized bicycle.



A ride on the new tandem

Fortunately, some other nut case—er, cycling enthusiast—had faced the same problem and come up with a “child stoker kit,” which boils down to an extra set of pedals mounted higher on the bike so that the kid can contribute extra power to the effort. It really works, too. On my own bike, I can average about 15 mph. With Xandie helping out on the tandem, we can get all the way up to 12.

Meanwhile, Xandie took up playing the string bass. Did you know that string instruments are priced by the amount of wood it takes to make them? A high-quality bass costs enough to feed a small town for a year. Luckily, Xandie only needed a beginner’s instrument, so we got away for merely the price of a Harvard education. That’s when Pat pointed out that we’d also need to buy a small truck to carry the thing. I told her we’d put it on wheels and hook it up behind the new bicycle.



Playing the bass

By this time it was summer. In Claremont, as in most American towns, we celebrate the warm weather by having barbecues. The special Southern California touch is that we don’t need a grill to cook the meat. Instead, we simply set the food on a lawn chair and wait for it to sizzle. Since Pat and I are heat-intolerant wimps, we decided to spend yet more money on a getaway vacation in the cool, fresh Montana mountains.

Have we mentioned global warming yet?

Montana has always had a forest-fire problem. I remember when I was a kid and Smokey the Bear taught us how to play with matches. (It was something like that, anyway—I’m a bit fuzzy on the details after 45 years.) But this year it seemed like the entire state was burning. Perhaps it was bad luck on our part (or maybe we shouldn’t have signed up for the “Smokejumper’s Special Tour”) but it would have been better for our lungs if we had stayed in LA and inhaled freeway fumes.



On a trail ride

of Pat’s horse).

We started out by visiting Geoff’s family in Great Falls (“Home of the Best Tacos in Great Falls”) and then dodged the fires to get to Glacier Park, which was almost invisible behind the smoke. After overnighing in an \$1800 hotel room (total square footage: 17), the three of us hiked up the hill at Logan Pass until Pat collapsed from hypoxia. Tossing her an oxygen tank (it clonked her on the head, producing pretty much the same result as if we’d simply ignored her), Xandie and I battled on through the snarling grizzly bears, charging bobcats, and chattering penguins to discover a secluded mountain lake frequented only by the most hardy Hollywood celebrities. We tarried long enough to chat with Paris Hilton (she’s really very nice, just misunderstood—and she had some great vodka with her!) before blundering back to the car through the smoke-shrouded passes.

The next day, we indulged Xandie’s passion for horses by signing up for a trail ride. You may have heard of the dude ranches popular in Montana. “Dude” is one of those folksy Western terms, loosely translated as “sucker who’ll pay \$739/hour for the privilege of riding any four-legged beast of burden while breathing dust and getting his butt pounded into chicken feed.” We had a wonderful time (or at least I think we did; it was a bit hard to see much beyond the back

After another sojourn in Great Falls, we traveled to Yellowstone Park (“Home of Some Really Stinky Holes in the Ground”), where Xandie signed up for the Young Scientists Program. Becoming a Young Scientist is a challenging task involving 4-6 hours of investigation, experimentation, and Congressional interrogation (“Are you certain, Miss Kuenning, that your theories will correctly predict the next volcanic eruption in Iraq?”). Xandie loved it, running around and recording colors and temperatures all over Geyser Basin while her parents helped out by precisely measuring the flavor of the local ice cream. Afterwards we repaired to yet another overpriced hotel room, this time with 19 whole square feet. But it was listed on the National Register of Historic Places, which I think really means the National Register of Places With Leaky Roofs And No Heat. We got in some fine snuggling that night.

After having a wonderful (cough, cough) time in Montana, we returned home, only to have Pat decide that our front yard should be “drought-tolerant” (translation: dead). She promptly called three contractors for bids, and I’m pleased to report that we’ll be able to replace our nice green grass with brown pokey cacti for only about \$10,000 per square foot. But not to worry, because we’ll be saving on water bills.



A Young Scientist

I figure we’ll break even in roughly 247 years.

Love,

Geoff Pat Xandie