

Everybody should have a hobby: we read that somewhere, so it must be true. Not wanting to violate such a well-known aphorism, we decided to go with the flow and develop a few outside interests this year. We thought about climbing Everest, but decided it was passé. Instead, each of us has developed our own approach to ~~wasting time~~ attaining personal fulfillment.



Xandie and Misty at the horse show

Xandie's passion, when you can get her nose out of a book, is horseback riding. She takes weekly lessons (for a handsome fee, of course) in which she learns to get the horse out of the stable, brush the horse, saddle the horse, clean the gunk out of the horse's hooves, water the horse, unsaddle the horse, step around the horse droppings, wipe the horse down, put the horse in the stable, and feed the horse. Since the lessons are only an hour long, she hasn't yet had time to actually *ride* the horse, but we're hoping that will come soon.

In the meantime, she has been working on an invention that she considers absolutely indispensable for any well-equipped horsewoman: a book holder that clamps to the saddle. Her first design was pretty effective but wasn't quite strong enough to hold her current reading material, *A Nietzschean Analysis of Dostoyevsky's Influence on Modern Sumatran Existentialist Thought, with Commentary on Aspects of Quantum Physics Affected by the Anthropological Influence of Moon Phases During the Summer Olympics*. Unfortunately, the book fell off the holder and landed on a nearby horse trailer, crushing it irreparably. Xandie is now working on a new design, featuring concrete supports, to resolve this difficulty.

Despite these impediments, Xandie did manage to participate in her first horse show this fall, riding in two events. For those of you who haven't been to a horse show, the primary activity seems to be waiting. People don't actually *ride* the horses, they just stand around waiting for them to arrive, waiting while somebody brushes the horse, waiting while somebody else braids the horse's mane, waiting to practice, waiting for food, waiting for their event, waiting for the judges, and (most importantly) waiting to get ribbons. If the Old West had been run this way, the outlaws would have died of old age before they ever got to town.

Eventually, though, Xandie's events came up, and she earned third place in one and fourth in the other. We were pretty proud of her accomplishment until we overheard the judge thanking her trainer for the bribe. But she had tons of fun and will no doubt soon beg Daddy to buy her a horse of her own. (Daddy, ever indulgent, will gently and lovingly answer, "OVER MY DEAD BODY!")

Pat, meanwhile, has continued to work in the garden. In the old days, this translated to getting down on your knees with a trowel, plunging it into the dirt, and trying to figure out whether those green things were flowers or weeds. (Answer: if you pull them out of the ground, they'll turn out to be flowers; if you leave them in, they'll be weeds.) Nowadays, however, Pat's primary purpose in gardening seems to be to pump money into our failing economy.

We mentioned last year that Pat wanted to convert our front lawn into a "drought tolerant" yard. Well, here's how that played out: in January, she started driving around town, looking at other people's yards. In February, Geoff bailed her out of the local lockup after she was spotted admiring City Hall's garden and arrested on suspicion of plotting terrorism. In March she began to figure out what she wanted, and ordered approximately \$7000 worth of gardening books from Amazon (Xandie's book holder came in very handy for stacking them up, since it was the only thing we owned that was sturdy enough).

In April and May, Pat started sketching her ideas. That's right, modern gardening doesn't involve actually getting *dirty*. Instead, the gardener makes drawings of what she thinks the stuff will look like. Of course, since they were just sketches, Geoff looked at them, nodded wisely, and says "I'm OK with it as long as we don't spend too much." Pat agreed, so in June she called up several contractors listed in the "Overpriced and Incompetent Household Help" section of the Yellow Pages.

At this point, Geoff had a very clever idea: if he could distract her with a summer vacation, perhaps she would forget all about the project. Since he had a conference in Boston, he dragged the whole family there. We had a great time walking the Freedom Trail, visiting the aquarium, seeing the Red Sox, and watching whales. Unfortunately, we also walked through the gardens in Boston Common, which reminded Pat of growy things, and she came home newly inspired and eager to move forward. Geoff, never one to let failure interfere with a plan, tried the same idea again, this time in Utah, with very similar results (except that now Pat started thinking about adding a ski hill—complete with gondola—to the drought-tolerant design).

By now it was August, and Pat was actively looking for help with the yard. Having learned from our bad experience with the kitchen, she interviewed several people and chose one who had no references or track record. However, we were sure that he must be competent, because he had an old beat-up pickup. The serious digging began in September, and Pat happily headed off to the nursery to buy plants.

Did we mention that any modern gardening project involves buying plants? Silly Geoff, he always thought that plants grew from seeds. Not any more. You go to a large establishment that has acres and acres of green things, enough to fill a small football stadium to the brim, and the gardener in the family listens carefully as the salesperson solemnly explains the



Snack break in Utah

subtle differences between low California desert scrub and low Nevada desert scrub. When your eyes begin to glaze over, you agree to buy the Nevada stuff because it's more suitable for your "microclimate" (which, Geoff was surprised to learn, is not a scientific measuring tool) and drive home with a trunkload of potted plants that the contractor will charge you a small fortune to bury in the yard.

But that's not the best part. The best part is that in addition to plants, we paid a pretty penny to buy some rocks. That's right, rocks. The kind you find buried in your yard, right where you planned to put up the swing set. The kind that you pay people good money to dig up and haul away. This is a *great* racket; person A pays the contractor to remove the rock, and instead of dumping it in the landfill, he gets person B to pay to install it. Then he waits ten years until B gets tired of the rock, and then charges him to take it out and sell it back to A. It's a perpetual money machine!

Rocks come in sizes, and of course you pay more for the bigger ones. Do you know how they measure rocks? "That's easy," you say, "in inches." Nope. "OK, pounds." Nope again. Give up? Rocks are measured in people, as in "That's a one-person rock" or "I need to bring three friends over because I bought a four-person rock." Pat wanted a football-team rock so Xandie could perch on it and read in the front yard. Xandie pointed out that she's a small kid and a basketball-team rock would probably do. Geoff won the debate, though (he changed the locks on the house and wouldn't give anybody a key until they caved in), so we wound up with a tennis-match rock. It looks very nice, although Xandie can't really sit on it because it's slightly smaller than our cat. But at least it was affordable.

By this time the front yard was full of spindly little plants, and Pat's friends were coming over to admire it. Geoff pointed out that it was mostly dirt, but everyone insisted that you simply had to imagine how it would look when the plants "filled out" in a few years. Or decades. Geoff remains skeptical, but at least he doesn't have to mow the lawn any more. (Pat has mercifully refrained from pointing out that he never mowed it before, since the gardener always takes care of that job.)

Speaking of Geoff, he's continued with his cycling. He and Xandie enjoyed a lot of rides on the tandem over the summer, and he commuted to work by bike every day. In the fall, however, he apparently decided that life was too boring, because one day he came around a corner on the way home from the office, saw some students, and expertly fell down. His injuries were slight, though, so he gave it another try the next week, this time flying over the handlebars and cleverly landing on his chin to protect his \$50 helmet from getting damaged. That one sent him to the emergency room to get a chipped tooth looked at (it's a good thing Bondo is cheap).

None of this kept Geoff off the bike, though, nor did it garner him the attention he was angling for. So in November, while sitting in on a photography class, he noticed that his left arm (which had been slightly injured in the second bike crash) was a bit sore. That was no big deal, except that he also had an odd pain in his chest and was sweating a bit.

Okay, here's a little quiz for you: you have chest pain, cold sweats, and some pain in your left arm as well. You've read and heard about this particular combination many times. What do you do?

That's right, you sit down at the nearest computer and Google for "cheap aspirin." Well...how about "heart attack symptoms?" That's what Geoff did. The list he found matched well enough to be worrisome, so he went back to his office (he wouldn't have wanted to disturb the rest of the class!), made sure his insurance card was in his pocket (this is America, after all), and grabbed his unicycle for the 6-mile ride to the emergency room. But on second thought he decided to be lazy, and called 911 instead.

Boy, are those guys efficient! In no time at all an ambulance was on the way, and Geoff barely had time to phone Pat to tell her what was going on before he was hooked up to an EKG and being loaded onto a stretcher. In the emergency room it was the same thing: bang-bang-bang, everybody with a specific job to do. Geoff was kind of bewildered by all the activity; he kept asking whether it was really necessary. Finally somebody told he that he had indeed had a heart attack.

"Oh, good," replied Geoff. "I wouldn't have wanted this to be a false alarm."

Moments later, he was in the operating room, and the doctor on call (appropriately named Dr. Reddy) did a balloon angioplasty and slipped a stent into the blocked artery. Little damage was done, he returned home quickly, and he's already close to normal. (Well, as normal as Geoff ever was, which isn't very.)

So that's how our year has been. Despite the recent excitement, we're doing pretty well. Pat has hidden the bill for the front yard, out of fear that it will send Geoff into a relapse. Xandie suggested that maybe he should give up cycling and starting riding a nice, safe horse to work. And Geoff is trying to figure out how he's gonna pay for all of it.

Wanna buy a rock?



Favorite transportation

Love,

Geoff Pat Xandie

* * * ...to be jolly! * * *