

It's been a rough year in the Kuenning household. Just to set your hearts at rest right away, it's not that we discovered the big "C". Well, not that "C" anyway. We are facing the threat of a much bigger, much more expensive, much scarier "C": College.

To be fair, we are well aware that there are benefits to Xandie's impending high-school graduation. We have already succeeded in getting her to sit still for a senior photo (admittedly, the straitjacket helped) and have hope that come next June, she will actually put on a pair of shoes long enough to walk across the stage. But preparing for the Big Departure is... challenging.



The Unforgiving Editor

Oddly, the first side effects began to show up over a year ago, when we realized that there were so many things we Should Have Done with our child but never had. We had missed all the quintessential American experiences, such as visiting the Grand Canyon and the Taj Mahal (that thing's in Indian country, right?), or ice fishing in July. So Geoff decided to get off his duff and take Xandie to Joshua Tree National Park, which turns out to be right in our back yard. (The throngs of tourists walking through our side gate are always annoying, but how many people have a national park in their back yard?) Xandie decided that it was the perfect place to take a portrait for her school newspaper's Web site, since at the time she was the editor of the Opinions page (she has since advanced to Assistant Editor-in-Chief, also known as she-who-fixes-all-grammar). After all, nothing says "newspaper editor" like a deformed tree, right?

But random jaunts aren't going to lead to a college diploma, so Xandie decided it might be wise to visit a few schools to see what they were like. You have probably forgotten that we had already done that the previous summer, but the upshot of *that* trip was that Xandie doesn't like the West Coast (her exact words were "I want someplace far away"—sure to charm any parent's heart). So off to the East Coast we went. The original plan was for Pat to

take her during spring break, but Pat cleverly arranged a conflicting commitment so Geoff got stuck with the task. Being an innocent in the matter (college professors don't know much about colleges), he planned a tour that would cover 11 schools in six days, ranging from New Hampshire to Washington, D.C.

In case you haven't had the pleasure, here's a summary of how pretty much every college tour in the nation goes. First you meet in a stuffy room with an admissions officer who explains that the college is absolutely the best ever because their fencing team won the state championships 14 years ago and one of their professors actually speaks to students on alternate Tuesdays when the moon is full. Then you are handed over to a "tour guide," a bubbly frosh who gushes nonstop about the facts that the dining hall offers kale and there are 473 student clubs, six of which have more than two members. The effervescent guide leads you around campus, pointing out the buildings that house various departments ("Our underwater basket-weaving program is one of the best in the country") and telling stories about how fun it is attend that particular university. As far as we can tell from the tours, no actual education goes on in college; professors win awards without ever seeing a student, and students go on marvelously educational field trips to places like the local bumblebee farm.

At some point in every single tour, the guide will stop and talk about the blue lights. Now you may be thinking "K-Mart? At a college?" You'd be wrong about that; the one constant across all colleges is that they most emphatically do *not* have low prices. No, the blue lights are all about "safety." Apparently all parents are convinced that their child will be mugged the moment they arrive on campus, and the blue lights are there to reassure them. Every blue light is connected to a button; if somebody should point a gun at you, you can press the button and a campus security officer will eventually show up in a golf cart to offer you a donut. This service makes parents much calmer, since they can be sure that their son or daughter won't be surviving entirely on pizza. Hah hah!

It was about halfway through the tour, when they got to Williamstown (which is named after Williams

College, which is named after Ephraim Williams, who apparently was named after his father), that Xandie became deathly ill. It wasn't Ebola (that didn't hit the news until September) but it left her unable to go on the pre-booked tours. "No problem!" said Geoff. "I'll just go on them for you and tell you what you think of each college." He figured that if he just said terrible things about every single one, Xandie would stay home. Because the only thing better than having a sullen teenager in your house is having a sullen teenager who is a college student residing at home and thinking she should have adult privileges.



**Geoff After 11
College Tours**

So off Geoff went. He toured Williams by himself, then Sarah Lawrence (that's a college, not a person), Columbia, NYU, and American University. Xandie dragged herself out of bed only long enough to visit the offices at Time, Inc., where our host kindly offered Xandie an internship "some day." She thanked him politely and then threw up. (She also managed to stay semi-erect through "Heathers, the Musical," which was previewing off-Broadway. If only the medical establishment could prescribe New York theater to everyone!)

But all was not lost. When they got back to Claremont, they found a brochure for a two-week journalism program at American University. Since we hadn't spent enough money on airfare yet, we happily signed Xandie up. No sooner was the ink dry on that check than we got another offer, this one asking her to spend three weeks in Germany, studying German—all expenses paid! Geoff jumped on that opportunity, quickly stealing Xandie's hat and coat so that he could pose as a teenage American exchange student and drink German beer. Sadly, his white beard gave him away. What a waste! Xandie doesn't even like beer.

Meanwhile, Pat came up with her own German connection: Max, a Bavarian dating back to 1917. She started writing check after check, explaining that Max had become decrepit and needed lots of support. Despite his trusting nature (hah hah!), Geoff eventually grew jealous and hired a private detective to find out more about this "Max." Imagine his surprise when he discovered that Max is a cello she is having restored. The joke's on him! At the current rate, it will be ready before it turns 200, at a final price only slightly greater than Xandie's college tuition.

In the fall, Geoff had a business trip to New York; he invited Xandie along so she could tour NYU for herself. He figured that she would hate the fall weather in New York and thereby cement her desire to stay in good ol' 105-degree LA. So of course it was crisp and gorgeous, she loved touring the school on her own, and to top it off she adored seeing "Mathilda, the Musical." (If you think you see a trend here, we're sure you're mistaken.)

Now that it's winter, college-application time has rolled around. The application forms aren't too bad (translation: Xandie fills them out by herself). But financial aid is whole 'nother matter. When we were kids, you asked for financial aid by walking up to a severe-looking lady who had her hair up in a bun and just saying you needed extra money to pay your tuition. The severe-looking lady would eye you up and down for a few minutes, as if deciding whether you would make a good supper, and then say no. It was a good system, simple and predictable.

But not so today. Instead you fill out the "Common Financial Aid Application," which is designed to achieve precisely the same result (i.e., no) after first driving the parents stark raving mad. (Sample question: "Enter the number from line 14a of your form 1040, unless you entered π on line 33b or have a vacation home in Tahiti, in which case enter your lipid profile." We're pretty sure we made a mistake on the eighteenth page and that the final total of our "ability to pay" is off by at least three dollars. No doubt they'll be coming for us with a SWAT team any minute now.

Until then, though, happy holidays! And if we call you up to ask for bail, it's OK to say you don't know us.



Santa (Not Max) Cello

Love,

Geoff *Pat* *Xandie*