

Dear Family and Friends,

December, 2022

Well, most of us have emerged from our “COVID-19 cocoons” and tried to resume normal life. People shout “The pandemic is over!” and crowd restaurants, movie theaters, and mall parking lots. Especially parking lots; it seems it’s still more important to drive in circles than to actually go shopping. We’re convinced that some people order all their stuff on Amazon and then head to the mall and try to find the closest possible parking space, just to prove that they still can. Four hours later they’ll triumphantly pull into a spot, exhausted by their search, and then go directly back home to brag about their accomplishment.

In the meantime everyone seems to still be confused by all the new rules. Should we test every day, or is it hourly? If we’re a “close contact” (we think that only applies if you shared a passionate kiss with somebody) do we have to quarantine for a month? Should you wear your N95 mask while swimming, or only right after you get out of the pool? Does the vaccine really cause earthquakes? We’ve tried Googling for the answers but the only thing we learned for sure is that Dr. Fauci is an axe murderer, or possibly somebody who would sound absolutely horrible on “The Masked Singer.” The consensus seems to be that the latter would be far worse, which is why he still has his day job.

Anyway, even before the pandemic started (remember those days, back when we all read by candlelight and cooked on wood stoves?) we decided to spice our lives up by getting some new pets. You may recall that when Xandie went off to college (so long ago!) we brought home Magic the tiny black kitten with a squeaky voice, and Sherlock the medium-sized furry brown dog who hates squirrels and air conditioners. The two made friends with each other and settled into a regular routine: Sherlock would bark at any noise he heard (or sometimes just because there was no noise); Magic grew up to be a fearless hunter who would bring us “gifts” of lizards, lizard tails, and the occasional buffalo. In between they would cuddle on the couch, or if Pat was available Sherlock would sit on her lap while Magic (whose voice never did change) squeaked for food or batted an endless collection of wine corks around the kitchen. When Xandie came home from college they both decided she was their cool big sister and hung out with her whenever possible, which was mostly OK but caused a bit of trouble when she wanted to sun herself in the back yard. After a few weeks she had a nice tan except for the dog-shaped light spot on her back and the lizard-shaped one on her left leg (Magic had been feeling especially generous).

A few years passed blissfully, and Xandie eventually graduated from college (we think she would have stayed forever, happily learning new things, but Northeastern sent us a nasty letter saying she needed to return the 23,578 overdue books she had checked out from the library). As a dedicated nonconformist, she earned her degree in December of 2019 and returned home one last time to prepare her applications to start grad school the next fall. You know where this is going: the world as we knew it ceased to exist.

The nice thing is that our forced isolation gave us a chance to (re-)bond as a family, and gave Xandie plenty of time to study Russian (really) and select grad schools. We also got a second cat, Luna, who loves to cuddle Geoff and kind of gets along with the other animals. When Xandie wasn’t applying to schools she sat on the couch and read. And read, and read, and read. Having remembered that Geoff had a college library card, she started using it to check out books with titles like “Desperate Magic: The Moral Economy of Witchcraft in Seventeenth-Century Russia” or “Understanding Ethnopolitical Conflict: Karabakh, South Ossetia, and Abkhazia Wars Reconsidered” or “Places of Tenderness and Heat: The Queer Milieu of Fin-de-Siècle St. Petersburg”¹ or “Russian Squirrels: Do They Really Wear Tiny Fur Hats?” (That last one might have been sneaked in by Sherlock.) The books kept getting thicker, the stacks taller, and the titles longer. Sherlock now decided it was his job to make sure she was totally dedicated to her studies, so he started sitting on *her* lap all day long. Poor Pat went into doggie withdrawal and had to be calmed by a gift of new Russian Sable paintbrushes, which Geoff augmented with an actual Russian sable to ease the icy-cold 60-degree Southern California weather (he chose a live one so as to not annoy the anti-fur folks; Pat loved it but is still recovering from the bites).

Eventually Xandie went off to grad school at the University of Glasgow—but somehow would only attend one of four semesters there. Having previously spent time in the Republic of Georgia, she chose to follow the “countries ending in *ia*” theme by starting her program (Central and East European, Russian and Eurasian Studies—we’re not making that up!) in Estonia with visits to Latvia and Lithuania before

¹These are real titles on her Amazon wish list; we weren’t able to find a record of what she’d gotten from the library. But don’t worry about her health: that list also seems to have almost every Terry Pratchett novel ever written.



On a Family Pandemic Trip



**With Partner
Callum Atop
Dashbashi Bridge**



Trip Planning With Sherlock

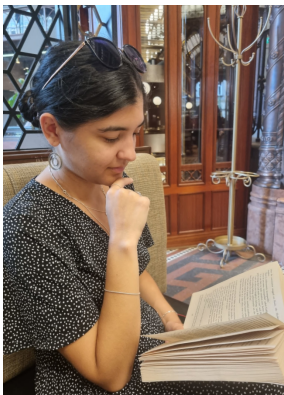
moving on to Glasgow, Scotland, followed by (this is true) living in or at least visiting Romania, Bulgaria (which should count twice because she lived in Sofia), North Macedonia, Armenia, Serbia, and now Georgia again. (Albania is in her plans for the spring.) The reality is that we would lose track of where she was and where she'd been except that she sent us postcards that said "Looking forward to your next visit" but arrived long after we've done that and come home again. She claims to have sent a card from Mars-ia but it hasn't arrived yet even though we keep calling SpaceX to check.

However, the dog (remember the dog?) has had great difficulty adjusting to all of these changes. During COVID he had spent so long with Xandie in the house all day that she had become his favorite person, and when she disappeared (by magic, as far as he could tell) he just didn't know what to do. He became convinced that she was just spending all her time in her room, so he started sitting outside her door waiting for her to come out. At dinner time he would dejectedly walk back to the kitchen for his food ration and then return to guard duty, muttering something about people who don't fulfill their cuddling obligations.

The other thing is we think he may be getting senile. He was always Pat's dog, and he always thought her lap was the best one around. Now he's forgotten her and insists on sitting on Geoff's lap instead. But Geoff doesn't have the correct leg position, so the dog tends to slide off. Then he'll get up, give Geoff a dirty look, and hop on the couch again—still ignoring Pat and her new pet sable. The upshot is that Pat is freezing cold and feeling rejected, and Geoff is grumpy because the cats won't come near him any more.

And Sherlock is writing "wish you were here" postcards to Xandie.

Love,
Geoff Pat



Always Reading



Glasgow Drinks



Happy Vacationer



**With the
Collection**