

Dear Family and Friends,

December, 2024

All parents have had the experience of turning around and finding that their child has wandered off while they weren't looking. Perhaps it was at Disneyland, where the toddler dashed off to embrace Goofy, who promptly collapsed from the heat and was carried away on a stretcher while the kid followed and tearfully promised to never hug any costumed character again. Or maybe the six-year-old was seduced by the freezer aisle at the grocery store and was found an hour later, happily eating her thirteenth ice-cream bar. In our case Xandie always had a tendency to disappear into a book (or several) for hours at a time, only to suddenly pop up when dinner was served.

But this time is different. It seems Xandie has vanished for good, and we don't quite know the cause. How it happened was this way:¹

If you haven't been put to sleep by our prior Christmas letters, you may recall that Xandie had decided to attend graduate school at the Universities of Tartu (Estonia), Glasgow (Scotland), and Tbilisi (Georgia—not the one where they play baseball). That way she could get three degrees (really!), see more of the world, and perhaps learn to speak a bit of both Tatar and Georgian (again, really!). But when she got to the actual research part, it turned out that before you cut people into pieces to see how their brains work, you have to get ethics permission. Xandie wasn't planning any surgery, but she still had to jump through the hoops—and the people holding the hoops had a tendency to walk away for months at a time to “have a cup of coffee.” The upshot was that she wasn't allowed to start her research until July '23, so it was a *leetle* difficult to finish by the original August deadline.

Nevertheless she persisted, returning to Glasgow to do the actual writing. There was a wonderful interlude where she and her partner Callum came here last Christmas, and it seemed like they really enjoyed their visit (except the L.A. freeways, of course). Back in Glasgow, after much tribulation and wailing (by Pat, not Xandie) she successfully defended her thesis and started job-hunting. Only it turns out that for a specialist in Eastern European politics, jobs are slightly scarcer than rides home from the International Space Station. Inspired by that thought, Xandie bought a bunch of bottle rockets, attached a resume to each one, and launched them toward the general vicinity of the European Union headquarters in Brussels. However, nobody offered her a position, possibly because they were too busy putting out the fires in their hair.

A couple of months of frustration led to a new problem: the British government was about to notice that there was a “damn furriner” living in Glasgow. So Xandie reluctantly climbed on a plane back home, only to find that Geoff had locked the front door for the night. After sleeping with the possums who have taken over our dilapidated treehouse, she was welcomed with open arms—and a quick dousing of flea spray, just in case.

At that point everything was just dandy: we had our daughter back, she was applying to jobs, and there was justification for the extra bedroom. And since paid work was still scarce, we could count on her to unload the dishwasher on a regular basis, relieving Geoff of that grueling task.

But of course there's always a snag. “Dad,” Xandie announced, “I want to go to graduation.”² “Certainly,” said Geoff. “It's being held at the usual place, right here in Claremont.”

“No, I want to go to *my* graduation. In Glasgow. The one in Scotland, not the one in Montana.”

“Oh.”

“And I want both of you to be there to witness the ceremony.”

“Oh,” said Geoff. “That makes perfect sense,” added Pat. “We can taste Scotch whisky while we're there!”

So in June, off we all went to Glasgow. On the appointed day we struggled up several million steps on a stone spiral staircase (with Geoff hauling a huge camera and a telephoto lens) into a gorgeous 19th-century hall with stained-glass windows and a big pipe organ that played glorious music (not by itself) while all the students marched down the aisle (by themselves). Then, after the usual speeches about the graduates' wonderful futures (of endless job-hunting), they lined up and—this is true—were each whacked on the head by a woman who was holding one of those flat graduation hats. We think maybe it was intended to loosen up all the brain cells that had ossified during the lengthy research process.

¹With apologies to Robert A. Heinlein, *Have Space Suit – Will Travel*, Charles Scribner's Sons, New York, 1958, p. 3.

²*Ibid.*

With that out of the way, we set out on a serious pursuit of Scotch whisky, Scotch beer, and most importantly, Scotch food (except haggis—we have our standards, after all). And castles, lots of castles. LOTS of castles: there are (this is also true) over 1,500 of them in Scotland. To be fair, we think we might have missed a few, but that’s just an excuse to go back. We also caught the Drumtochty Highland Games, where we saw competitions ranging from Highland dancing to tossing the caber (aka a telephone pole), a feat that has to be seen to be believed. Geoff asked if he could “have a go” at it, but after one small heave he decided that he was better suited to tossing back another wee dram.

When our visit was over, Xandie decided to stay for a few more weeks until Callum went back to sea. In retrospect that’s where we went wrong: living in his fourth-floor flat probably got her circulation going and made her look healthier in all the Zoom interviews. Still, things were promising: Callum got a ship assignment and Xandie was due back in Claremont in early August.

And then, all of a sudden, we turned around and couldn’t find her! Five days before her return, she got a job offer with OC Media, where she had interned in 2019 and loved it. Off to Tbilisi, Georgia, she went, and in an instant we had a missing daughter.

Since then we have gotten several ransom notes (“Help! I can’t get the stove to work!” and “The smoke detector turns the gas off!”) but none of them have suggested that she might return if we pay up. Instead she has immersed herself in Georgian politics and culture.

That was in August; since then we’ve had to once again live alone with the empty bedroom. But all is not lost; in addition to her existing musical endeavors Pat has joined a piano trio, a string quartet, *and* a second orchestra, and Geoff is diligently trying to get into good enough shape to ride his bike to Georgia. Pat has delicately refrained from pointing out that Georgia is across the Atlantic and bikes don’t float.

But the good news is that since he’s not quite that fit yet, we’ve booked a flight to see Xandie for New Year’s and Orthodox Christmas. We hugely enjoyed Georgia the first time we were there (excellent wine!), so we’re looking forward to revisiting.

If you get a ransom note, don’t worry. The stove is already fixed.

Love,
Geoff Pat



The Graduate!



St. Pat the Cellist



Getting a New Bike



**Highland
Dancing**



Lindisfarne Castle, Northumberland



Tossing the Caber