

December 16, 2002

Happy Holidays from the Bruce family:

If, dear reader, you were to glance at our calendars and lists for 2002, they would look much the same as 2001. A little travel, a lot of music and theater for the kids, too much work and school for all of us. I will spare you most of the details and just fill in a few highlights.

For a change, let's begin with Chip. As I began this letter one morning early in December, he faced a 1:00 deadline for a book he's been struggling to complete. I can't declare that he quite made it, but very nearly. The book promises to be featured on the publisher's Book of the Month Club list for March, a nice honor. (<http://reading.org>)

He's also had a few interesting excursions this year. One took him to Baton Rouge, where a new community college was trying to determine how virtual their library should be---that is, should they order print or merely rely on electronic resources? In May he is invited to a gathering in Puebla, Mexico, and I may have to go along as official interpreter. Other possible trips to Thailand and Ukraine have yet to find a spot on the calendar.

I've launched into a new activity, bringing my work life full circle. When I graduated college in 1970, my first job was for the Santa Clara County Welfare Department in a building that is now filled with condos, in a place once called Silicon Valley. This fall I trained to become a Court Appointed Special Advocate, one of those volunteer jobs that might as well be real work. I spent a lot of time in Juvenile Court, listening to abuse and neglect cases that are closed to the public. Shortly I'll be given my own case to monitor, the theory being that the judge needs as much information as possible about the best interests of the child. I'm withholding judgment about how well the system works for troubled families, but I do know already that there are many sad stories in this small county.

Emily would tell you there is more going on in her life beyond college applications, but she's resigned to this being the first question she's asked wherever she goes. So, in brief, she's delaying the decision until spring, by applying to too many colleges: one in Iowa, one in St Paul, MN, and one in Chicago. (Late breaking news: she just received a fat envelope from the University of Chicago, so at least one place wants her.) And then there are four in Massachusetts, one in Maine, one in Pennsylvania, and one in Rhode Island. Evidently that subscription I gave her to *Yankee Magazine* a few years ago paid off. She's not certain what she'd like to study, so these small and medium-sized liberal arts colleges will give her many options.

She's had a few honors worth a mother's boasting---was accepted into the State Honors Chorus last year and this, won a decent scholarship from Discover Card, and was one of 5 national winners in the Signet Classic Essay Contest. But that was rigged, the topic this past year was Jane Austen, and she's been an Austen fan for a long time. She received 172 classic paperbacks, which we will one day work our way through, and a little money for her efforts.

Our linguist, Stephen, spends his time at parties speaking Russian to Chip's colleagues, or at least he did this past weekend. (Next year he'll have to come up with some answers to the college question.) He's in his second year of Russian, in a class with only six students and a gem of a teacher. This group of friends includes kids who use their spare time to make movies of Gogol or Chekov short

stories in our back yard, and Stephen often plays the butler, wearing Chip's Dad's tuxedo from the 1960's. Digital video has transformed their lives. By contrast, the film a college friend and I made in Greece in 1969 involved splicing with cellophane tape.

Stephen can test this elementary Russian next summer, when his teacher takes a group to St. Petersburg. Once again, I have to go along, but not to translate, alas. I can't even read Cyrillic. But I have to deliver him to his French trip, and it's the 300th anniversary of Petersburg, something one can't say about this part of the world. He's in the final year of French, and some of his classmates will be somewhere in the south of France, just up the street from Russia. After I drop him off, I'd like to go walking somewhere in Europe with the rest of my family, but no one has taken me up on the offer yet. We won't be flying Aeroflot, nor going to the theatre in Moscow. And, needless to say, he will be spending some time this winter and spring earning some money to pay for all this.

We expanded our family this past spring, to host a 14-year-old German girl for two months. Antonia was a delight, and put up with our hectic schedule with good grace. She shared our kids' love of music. I wish I could describe what she and Emily looked like, dressed in pink, each with her brown hair up in pigtails, playing piano duets at a school recital. Our other "daughter," Liqian, is still at the University of Chicago, finishing her PhD with those famously conservative economists. She traveled back to China this summer with her boyfriend, during which time their families urged them to go to the wedding photographer to spend the day getting made up and dressed up for a formal photo in white dress and tux. The result is cute, but we're pleased that they haven't actually married yet, since we want to be there.

Closer to home: last summer we lived a month in a cottage on a farm in western Massachusetts, with occasional forays out to visit friends and colleges. Our landlords raised Norwegian horses and bottled maple syrup, so it was a delightful place to spend an extended quiet vacation. We had cable TV and the kids discovered old Star Treks. Now that they can drive, their usual destination on a weekend—when they're not at swim meets, or rehearsing plays, or endlessly doing calculus—is the video store to rent more Next Generations. (My idea of Star Trek is Captain Kirk and Spock, but they thought those were just too quaint.) At this rate, it will take them several years to get through all, and by that time they will have moved away from the world's greatest video store—one more reason why I've come to terms with living in Urbana. With our wonderful library, the video store, one good French bakery, and no traffic, it's become not half bad.

Just after Christmas, we'll make a quick trip to Texas for three days with Chip's family, and then on to California for three days with mine. We'll manage to see almost all of these not-so near-dear ones, and I can report that—with a few ups and downs—they're all well.

We send our best wishes to all—to our most distant correspondents in Australia and Beijing, to a few in south Champaign, and to everyone else in between.