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Among the visitors over Thanksgiving was a grandson starting his freshman year at a college in Santa Fe, New Mexico. He hooked a ride from New Mexico to Mertz on with a classmate. Made the last leg of the trip to Mertz on in a Dodge pickup reserved for such stunt drivers as college students and deer hunters.

His mother and father arrived on the same night from Austin. The big reunion in the living room interrupted my 10 p.m. to 5 a.m. nap. After embraces, the conversation took the course of the same questions my parents asked, the same questions I asked my brother and sister, and the same questions I asked my children upon return from the first term at school.

Once disturbed, I was unable to go back to sleep. I studied the questions and the answers. I recognized the parents' struggle to treat the boy as a grownup. Accepted the son's strain to be respectful, yet retain his new role of freedom. My position was perfect as the thin wall transmits sound instead of concealing sound. I spent several days working on the project. Here is the way I approached the study: First, I entered the routine question. Next, I entered the expected answer. And last, I wrote down my closest guess to the true answer.

Hands down, the easiest and most comfortable grounds for the student and the parent to talk about is the food in the college dining room. The scene opens with the father or mother in a pose of good sportsmanship saying, "I guess the food taste like home cooking." Allowing the student to reply, "Gosh, I miss Mom's hot rolls and Dad's grilled steaks." A major overhaul is needed here. The correct inquiry is: "When is the last time you had a bite of solid food?" Skip the subterfuge. Go right to telling him his diet needs to be more than malt, barley, hops and popcorn.

The next move is don't put off talking about grades. Instead of dilly-dallying around asking if he's seen ol' Dean Click, say: "Dean Click called for permission to have a doctor check you for *somniac academic* (sleeping in class). While I had him on the phone, I asked him to forward you a list of the part-time campus jobs in case parental support ended."

The next question arises alone with one or the other of the parents. To wit: how is the social life? In Dad's case, he'll claim his alma mater had more pretty gals than pages in the books at the library. (College men use "library" as a subject to the point of having a fetish about the word.) The son, quick of wit the way of college lads, will go "Hah-hah-ha, I bet you gave them all a

round." By the time the dad ends his diatribe, the old man will have forgotten whether Santa Fe is a wilder town than Paris, or a religious shrine.

Mothers are different than fathers. Mothers want sons to marry a nice girl. Ol' mom also may be harder to side-step. Her trick question might be, "Are the college girls as frivolous and flighty as the ones in high school?" Mom knows girls are girls, be they from Radcliff or Raymondville, but boys can't tell a feather duster from an ostrich plume once a coed walks by wearing tight blue jeans. However, just watch how smoothly he handles this, looking Mother in the eye: "They are so different. So smart. Yes, we have dates to meet in the library on Saturday night." (Undergraduates overuse "library," too.) "Yes, I sit on the campus lawn with different girls discussing lectures. But they are so serious and so mature."

And what I did overhear him telling his cousins: "Gawd-a-mighty, remember that oddball out at Edison High named 'Clark'? First week, he met a girl who had never had a date before in her life. Fell in love. Five weeks later, a student ordained as a preacher on the Internet married them on a peak in the Sangre de Cristo mountain range." Ignoring the laughter, he continued saying he and his

roommate became so excited about the news, they hitchhiked up to Toas for three days to check on the weddings on those mountain tops.

Part of the test is going to be getting the student back to school. He will make this extra difficult if he doesn't own an automobile or a motorcycle. Parents don't want to be over-solicitous. Yet seeing old Bozo asleep on the couch on Saturday morning before school opens on Monday shoots the parents' nerves past holiday levels into the reaches of the trading floors of the stock exchanges. Time for timid inquiries is out. Time is in to say, "Bozo, get in there on the phone and start calling your ride. Do it now!" Believe it or not, he will comply at Thanksgiving, but don't count on arousing him by New Year's...