GRANDPARENT GENOCIDE

By AARON KARP

This autumn witnessed an important passage for many of you: a child or grandchild starting college. For parents it is a moment of celebration and a touch of sadness.

But for grandparents, the transition is fraught with danger beyond imagination. When freshmen worry about surviving college, they speak metaphorically. Will they prosper or return home in shame?

For you, the risks are far greater.

I am not an actuary, but years in the classroom have shown me that nothing endangers older Americans like a grandchild starting college. Sudden Grandparent Death (SGD) does not show up in insurance statistics or medical examiner reports, but it is a brutal killer, rivaling heart disease, cancer and car collisions.

Sudden Grandparent Death is a strange killer of older Americans. Your age and previous health are completely irrelevant. SGD syndrome strikes with equal unpredictability at grandparents aged 45 or 95. Most at risk are grandparents of weak students. Lousy grades and decrepit grandparents go together like bacteria and plague.

The problem peaks a couple of days before midterm exams, when my students report a scourge of grandparent mortality. Take solace from their grief; your grandchild invariably is shocked, disoriented and deeply hurt by your death. Above all, he or she is unable to do assigned work.

At greatest danger are distant grandparents. The further away, the more prone to sudden death. My students must travel thousands of miles to funerals, the planning for which preoccupies their every moment for weeks. For some reason, relatives close by are immune to Sudden Grandparent Death syndrome.

Suddenness and grief add to the mystery. The exact cause of death is never mentioned. Maybe I am too discreet, but I have learned not to ask; too much pathetic stammering.

Freshman introductory classes are the most dangerous. I have had one-quarter of a class e-mailing in anguish, postponing exams in the wake of Sudden Grandparent Death. Intro to International Politics, my most deadly offering, can provoke fatal grandparent epidemics.

My colleagues do not discuss the matter. Nor does the professional literature. So far my dean has said nothing. If more grandparents paid tuition, I probably would have the university administration after me.

Am I responsible for this slaughter of the innocents? Might an extra credit assignment save grandparents’ lives? Would another postponement? It is tempting to blame the tyranny of the semester schedule — your honor, I had no choice — but freshmen seem immune to my priorities.

It is my duty as a professor to deal with the consequences. Rather than demand a crass death certificate — those take weeks, anyway — I offer what little sympathy I can muster and reschedule the exam that killed you. All I bury is integrity. Besides, I must respect the possibility that your death is permanent this time and had nothing to do with the midterm.

At the risk of sounding cynical, I have come to believe the grandparents of America’s college freshmen live at the mercy of their grandchildren. Fortunately, there are precautions that will insulate you from Sudden Grandparent Death syndrome:

Nag: Above all, push your grandchild to keep his or her grades up and stay abreast of assignments. Nothing is as dangerous to you as a grandchild falling behind.

Move: Hug your beloved cutie. Nearby grandparents seem virtually immune to sudden death. Far distant grandparents are in greatest jeopardy.

Warn: Tell your freshman’s professors about your funeral preferences. We will gladly coordinate your all-too-likely demise with the midterm schedule.

And do not lose hope. Make it to final exams, and the risks decline sharply; no one ever wants to postpone those.

If you get through your beloved cutie’s freshman year, your chance of long-term survival is pretty good. The grandparents of college juniors and seniors seem virtually immune. But your future may not be safe if a little brother or sister lurks a few steps behind.

Aaron Karp is a lecturer in political science at Old Dominion University. He plans midterms for late October.