

**College Quest - Julia Barry**  
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Grades 11-12

As my senior year of high school approaches, it's time to embark on the most daunting of odysseys: the quest for the right college. I'll be the second child in the family to depart for the dorm life, so I hope my parents, Mom in particular, have expended most of their unwarranted concern on my older brother, Mark.

It seemed Mark's saga would be short and uncomplicated; he would simply attend West Virginia University. As Mom pragmatically pointed out he'd be relatively close, so if he missed home, got sick, had a panic attack, or was hit in the head by a meteorite, he could come home anytime. Mom viewed Mark as the star running back sprinting down the open field to the WVU end zone. In arguably the greatest quarterback sneak of all time, Dad slipped through Mom's defenses, mailed some of Mark's applications to other schools, and scored a touchdown for a southern university. Coach Mom nearly had a stroke. She raged about deadly tornadoes, vicious insects, and the harmful effects of too much deep-fried food. She then packed Mark a first aid kit complete with finger splints, a stomach pump, eighty-four different medications, and Chigger-X. (Chiggers are tiny southern parasites that deliver a flea-like itch raised to an exponential power of ten.)

Now, after two years, Mark is thriving down south and hasn't gotten chiggers even once. Figuring Mom's overdeveloped worry gene may have switched off, I decide to discuss college choices with Dad.

"How about Louisiana State University," I suggest. Mom appears so suddenly that she might have sprouted from the floor boards like some mutant flower—an angry mutant flower.

Her hands are welded to her hips and the fierce expression on her face would intimidate the toughest gridiron competitor.

“Hurricanes,” she snarls.

“The University of Oklahoma?” I propose.

“Tornado Alley,” Mom snaps.

I start to realize that my biggest problem in choosing a college will not be financial.

“Arizona,” I throw out desperately, “I like warm climates.”

Mom’s eyebrows hike all the way to her hairline. “You never drink enough water; you’d dehydrate and have to be hospitalized every other week.” I sigh and massage my temples. This ordeal may be enough to *make* me start drinking.

“You could have a doctor insert a central IV line and she could pack lots of refill bags,” Dad quips sarcastically

“And,” Mom adds, “your cousin, Chris, got stung by a scorpion in Arizona.”

“While camping in the desert,” I point out.

“Arizona *is* a desert!” Mom retorts.

“Florida,” I offer.

“Not only does Florida have mosquitoes carrying malaria and West Nile Virus, it also has the most lightning strikes of any state,” Mom deftly counters.

“And retirees with golf clubs,” Dad says in a mock horrified voice.

I groan. “Washington State?”

“Mount St. Helens!” Mom parries.

I try again. “What about California?”

Mom responds, “What about the San Andreas Fault and earthquakes? Wildfires, too!”

“Why don’t you just petition the governor of West Virginia to establish a university in the underground compound at the Greenbrier? It was built to withstand nuclear warfare,” Dad drawls sardonically.

I try to motion him into silence, but it’s too late. I see Mom’s protective-mode gears grind to a halt and her idea cogs begin to spin.

“Well,” Mom ponders, “the compound does have dormitories, a cafeteria, a hospital, a lab, and an operating room. The congressional meeting chambers could be used as lecture rooms.”

“The mascot could be a mole; go mighty Moles!” Dad exclaims.

Ignoring Dad’s comments, as she has done for more years than I can remember, Mom continues, “Maybe I should petition the governor and the State Board. There are bound to be other parents who are worried about their children’s safety and would support the idea.”

“Well, speaking of children’s safety, did you know that Mark was applying to study in Germany this summer?” Dad asks innocently. I can tell by the gleam in his eye that he’s just found a zinger of a plan in the back of his play book. I sense another quarterback sneak.

Mom snaps to attention. “Germany? They just recently thwarted a terrorist plot there. I’ve got to call Mark right now!”

Wearing an expression befitting a Spartan facing invading Persian soldiers, Mom whips out her cell phone and marches outside, where cell service exists, to convince Mark that he will never make it back from Germany alive.

Dad winks and clicks his laptop mouse several times. “Here are the online applications for your top four choices. Let’s finish and e-file them before Mom comes back.” As we work frenziedly, we hear snatches of Mom’s loud, long lecture to Mark, “...terrorist

plot...transatlantic flight...engine failure..." Soon my applications are swiftly and surreptitiously sent into cyberspace.

A few minutes later, Mom storms in and fixes Dad with a scorching glare that could melt the hard drive of his laptop and cause his person to spontaneously combust. "Mark said that I was being 'excessively paranoid,' and that you've known about the Germany application for a month," Mom growls. Dad's survival instinct kicks in and he wisely takes the "Fifth," refusing to further incriminate himself. Mom then suspiciously checks the outgoing mail stack to make sure Dad didn't slip in any "unapproved" applications while she was outside. When she is satisfied that none exist she says, "I'm going to draft that letter to suggest using the Greenbrier facilities for a new state college now. Don't try anything deceitful while I'm out of the room."

Dad nods his solemn consent, but when Mom's back is turned he shoots me a sly grin, certain that he's scored a touchdown for the opposing team again. I myself silently pray that some vicious Internet virus won't sabotage my applications. Otherwise, my college quest might end with Coach Mom making sure that I'm a member of the first class of West Virginia's Greenbrier Underground University. Go Moles!