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Out here you actually see the clouds and the stars and the storms, instead of just reading about them in the newspapers. They become a genuine part of your daily life, and half the entire horizon is yours in one glance just for the looking, and the distance sort of gets into your soul and makes you feel that you too are big inside.

— Ernie Pyle, Depression-era Albuquerque resident and World War II correspondent

A New Mexico Diary

January 8: Uncle Doug, Aunt Sherry, and cousin Josie are living for a year in Costa Rica, at a place called Monteverde in the cloud forest of the central highlands. Eleven days ago we flew to San Jose with Carl's parents, where we joined Doug's family for a tour of Costa Rica's wide range of terrains, climates, and flora and fauna. Carl got a taste of the '60s driving a rented '69 Volkswagen van. The van and its occupants survived the pot-holed secondary roads and the national test of machismo called the Pan-American Highway, but Karen always opted for security over excitement by riding in the safety of Doug's fortress-like Toyota Land Cruiser. Skirting Lake Arenal, we found a rowdy troop of about 30 howler monkeys in a tree next to the road; just as we prepared to leave, the whole troop crossed the road in front of us, singly or in pairs, babies clinging to mothers, people snapping pictures. In Monteverde we spotted the spectacular blue morpho butterfly and seven species of tropical hummingbirds, flashing iridescent blues, greens, magentas, and violets, but we missed seeing the resplendent quetzal at the Cloud Forest Preserve. At Playa Grande, under a bright moon, we witnessed the unforgettable spectacle of an enormous leatherback turtle laboriously laying its cue-ball-sized eggs on the beach. The perfectly conical summit of Volcan Arenal hid behind clouds during our entire visit, but we see it today as we fly far above on our way home, trading the warmth of Costa Rica for the winter chill of Albuquerque.

March 22: Winter plays a cold and snowy endgame—El Niño no doubt—adding two weeks to the skiing season at Sandia Peak. Jeremy and Carl ride the tram to the top of the slopes for their last day of skiing—a beautiful day, warm and sunny, with two feet of fresh snow coating the mountain. Eleanor has been left behind because she can't get the hang of getting on and off the lifts, a problem that elicits so much sympathy that lift terror appears to be a widespread, but unrecognized national problem.

March 24: Eleanor cuts her hair short. Though it's a tough decision, it is well received by her friends, and she quickly adjusts to it, wondering why she kept her mid-back-length hair so long.

March 29: Mitzvah Day at Congregation Albert. Volunteers fan out to do good deeds in the community, and many spend extra hours cleaning up the synagogue in preparation for the 1,300 people expected to attend tomorrow's funeral for Albuquerque's Congressman, Steve Schiff. Karen, increasingly involved in Temple activities and slated to become President in mid-1999, is interviewed by local television as she gives a toilet a much-needed thorough cleaning.

April 6: Jeremy, Eleanor, and Karen, accompanied by Karen's niece Sarah, see the White Sox rally in the bottom of the ninth to defeat the Texas Rangers 5–4. We have excellent seats—26 rows behind first base—courtesy of Karen's cousin Dean. The spring conditions, cold and windy, are not baseball weather, but Jeremy, who is certainly not just a fair-weather fan, delivers a glowing report on the game anyway. The chief event of this Chicago visit, the bar mitzvah of Dean's son, Adam, took place last Saturday. Karen and the kids take advantage of spring break to spend a week seeing the Chicago sights. Carl has to miss both the game and the sightseeing to return to his job of initiating UNM's physics majors into the mysteries of electromagnetism.

April 11: Carl returns the family's rental skis and boots and heads directly to Bernardo Beach Native Plant Farm to buy about fifty native and xeric flowering perennials to stock his new garden. The success of last year's small plot has induced him to try to convert to garden a larger area of hard-packed clay, probably used as an extra parking area by the previous owners. The demanding task of amending the soil, creating terraced beds, and hauling dozens of rocks—our yard's major resource—into the garden to bound the beds was completed last month. Today is the first reward as the plants are put in place. Many will feed the local cottontail population, but a few will survive to brighten our summer days.

April 12: Fleety, our male broad-tailed hummingbird, returns from Mexico twelve days late, his arrival presumably delayed by the cold El Niño spring.

April 14: Jeremy's best friend Mark watched horrified as his pet dog was snatched by a bobcat from the fenced back yard several weeks ago. Now a trap, supplied by the New Mexico Department of Game and Fish and baited with a road-kill jackrabbit, catches the culprit. In waning sunlight we view the catch, an impressive male bobcat that looks a lot like the one we have seen several times in our own yard. It's a sad sight. The bobcat will be taken to a National Forest fifty miles west of Albuquerque, where Game and Fish estimates a 50% chance of successful adjustment to the new surroundings. We can't help thinking that the world abounds in pets and that perhaps more of our effort ought to go into making room for bobcats.

April 26: El Niño strikes again. Just after dawn snow begins to fall in huge, slushy flakes. Our initial notion—surely the ground is warm enough to melt the snow—gives way to the reality of three inches of slush on the ground. The live oaks and junipers periodically shake off their heavy burden of snow, like a shaggy, green dog awakening in a snowstorm. Fleety and his mate, Greeny, make repeated visits to our hummingbird feeder, the snow pelting them as they feed, and then sit disconsolately in the shelter of nearby junipers, probably wondering why their travel agent didn't book another month in Mexico. Yesterday's bright sunshine, which saw Jeremy get his first hit of the Little League season—off the best pitcher in the league—and Eleanor bat twice in one inning, seems far away, but it returns in late afternoon to melt the snow away.

June 20: Breakfast brings the welcome news that Carl's Father's Day present is a new propane barbecue. But there's a catch: he and his father, visiting for Father's Day, must examine the ads culled from the morning paper, shop for and buy a grill, have the propane tank filled, and put the whole thing together before dinnertime, so that the steaks in the refrigerator can have the honor of being the first cooked on the back deck. The salesperson's bland assurance that the Weber grill is nearly entirely assembled—"I think you just have to attach the lid"—turns out to be the usual fairy tale. The assembly instructions are just what you expect—so tortuously detailed on the simple steps that you're talked out of doing the obvious, yet so maddeningly vague on the complicated steps that you're left to figure those out for yourself—but the team approach works well, as Carl and his dad can alternately reach the level of frustration where one is inclined to chuck the whole thing into the trash. The steaks are good, however, and the frustration melts away in our mouths.

July 3: Using money saved by Jeremy's electing not to go to the Albuquerque Academy, we buy Jeremy a new computer. He funds the upgrade to a remarkable 19-inch, 0.22-resolution monitor, of which he is very proud.

July 8: Jeremy receives a big box in the mail from Uncle Jay. Opening it, he finds 10,000 baseball cards, purchased from a Virginia collector. After careful sorting, they become the foundation for his burgeoning collection.

July 10: Hadar Ben-Yehuda, Eleanor's age, leaves today after staying with us for three weeks while her father Adi, who works for Intel in Israel, visits Intel facilities in the U.S. The Ben-Yehudas became good friends when Adi was stationed at the Albuquerque Intel facility for three years. Hadar achieves her parents' goal of intensive exposure to English—she's welcome any time she needs a refresher, although we are nervous about being regarded as models of English speech—and Jeremy and Eleanor take advantage of the visit to learn from Hadar how to call each other "stupid animal bathroom" in Hebrew—*tepesch chaya shirutim*.

August 6: We near the end of a three-week vacation in Southern California, where we again enjoy the hospitality of Abby Hellwarth in Santa Monica. Aside from major-league baseball games and obligatory trips to Disneyland, Camp Snoopy, the City Walk at Universal City, and the Long Beach Aquarium, the main objective seems to be collecting beanie babies for Eleanor and baseball cards and pins for Jeremy. This evening the gero group meets for dinner at a favorite Chinese restaurant, Yang Chow, in LA's Chinatown. As we loiter outside the restaurant after dinner, our attention is drawn to a big "C" plastered to the front window, which turns out to be the rating awarded to the restaurant by the LA Health Department. Everyone turns a little green, but it turns out that a "C" rating is not a sentence of instant death or even of instant food poisoning, perhaps only a mechanism for inducing post-dinner discomfort.

August 9: Beginning the drive home, we spent yesterday and last night in Big Bear, showing Jeremy and Eleanor our former vacation home and nearby outdoor wedding site, now fenced off, perhaps as a defense against the mountain of litter outside the fence. On our way to Phoenix today, we enjoy a rare cloudy and cool August day in Joshua Tree National Park. In the photo Jeremy and Eleanor confront a thorny problem in the teddy-bear cholla garden. Watch out! The spines on those deceptively cuddly "jumping cholla" can jump right out of the snapshot.

August 10: This evening we see the Phillies, behind Curt Schilling's 3-hitter, beat the Diamondbacks 3-0 at the BOB, Phoenix's spectacular new stadium with a retractable roof, where a summer game usually opens with the chant, "It's 110° here in Phoenix. A beautiful evening for baseball." Karen ventures the opinion that it's silly to be playing baseball in what amounts to a big room, but our mid-day, 105° tour of the Phoenix Botanical Garden—we had the impressive garden pretty much to ourselves, not even encountering mad dogs or Englishmen—should have persuaded anyone that outside a swimming pool, the great outdoors is not the place to be on a summer day in Phoenix.

August 15: Jeremy is spending the weekend in Denver with his friend, Aaron Oster-Beal, who moved to Denver in June. Jeremy and Aaron have a great time trading baseball cards, and they see the Rockies defeat the Phillies 7-3 at Coors Field, Curt Schilling going down to defeat this time against the Rockies sluggers. Jeremy and Aaron meet some Rockies players before the game, and Jeremy almost gets an autograph from Mike DeJean, but Mike objects to signing a Kurt Abbott card, the only one Jeremy has handy.

September 15: An armada of clouds moves majestically across the sky. Small cruisers scurry in advance of a ponderous battleship, its top gleaming white in the early morning sun, its underside black and leaking rain that never reaches the ground, its enormous shadow darkening 500 square miles of our view. As the battleship mounts the Sandias, it goes to war: the rain intensifies amid sparks of lightning and the low rumble of thunder, and we experience a violent, but brief morning shower.

September 26: Jeremy is away at a Sunday School retreat, so Karen, Carl, and Eleanor spend an evening at the New Mexico State Fair, mainly to gorge on the roasted corn on the cob—Eleanor eats four cobs—and to sample the home-made pies at the Asbury Cafe. Eleanor is attracted to a small stand selling beanie babies, including retired ones, but her desires run smack dab into her depleted finances, and she is forced to adjust reluctantly, but womanfully to her straitened circumstances.

September 30: The last service on Yom Kippur, Neilah, ends with a cacophonous shofar blast by every member of the congregation who has a shofar and with a spectacular double rainbow that frames the Sandias.

October 17: Early in the morning we set out for Chaco Culture National Historical Park with our friends, the Grosses, planning to spend Saturday night camping out. As we approach Cuba, 60 miles northwest of Albuquerque, Carl wonders aloud about the tiny, white flower that has begun to dot the roadside. The dots quickly thicken till it can't be denied that they are a dusting of snow, and in Cuba there's nearly an inch of the stuff on the ground. Our weakening camping resolve is blown away completely by the brisk wind that accompanies a picnic lunch at Chaco. Canceling our camping reservations, we resign ourselves to a blustery afternoon touring the ruins. Suddenly the wind calms, the sun shines brightly through puffy, white clouds, and the afternoon turns out to be beautiful, the golden cottonwoods lining Chaco Wash setting off the drab, but haunting and impressive ruins of the Anasazi.

October 23: Jeremy receives his first middle-school report card—all A's—and, to his surprise, is awarded a trophy for the best model car in his 21-person industrial arts class. This was his first and probably last model-car project, and he had some help from Karen, who assisted by forcing ill-fitting pieces into place. Jeremy speculates that he won because his disinclination to paint the car fortuitously matched his teacher's directions, which were ignored by more enthusiastic classmates.

October 30: Eleanor is elected secretary of the Double Eagle Elementary Student Council. She addresses an assembly of registered voters (third, fourth, and fifth graders), promising to take accurate minutes of the Council's proceedings and to work for better food in the school cafeteria, but she has cleverly chosen to run for an office where she is unopposed.

October 31: We install a new custom-made circular table and matching chairs in our breakfast nook. Designed by Karen and our friend, JoAnn Duchen, the table has a large Mimbres lizard in the center, with Mimbres rabbits frolicking around the edge. As Karen and Carl prepare to take the table away from the store, Karen comments that she hopes the colors are suitable. At home we discover that they are spectacularly right, thanks to JoAnn, who has a perception of colors and shapes—indeed, of style—that we don't have. The table is so appealing that it's tempting to reverse the roles of the breakfast nook and our formal dining room.

November 17: Carl awakes at 4:00 am to check if the Leonid meteor shower is living up to promise. Having seen four shooting stars within 30 seconds, he reports laconically to Karen, "I think it might be worth it." Jeremy and Eleanor are aroused, and we all gather on the back deck, clad in coats and pajamas, and watch transfixed as meteorite after meteorite zips across the sky. The Sandias are bathed in the orange glow of the city—though there's no moon, it's not really dark. A pack of coyotes completes the scene, their maniacal yipping filling the night. Suddenly an arrow pierces the sky—this is a big one whose dusty trail lingers for a full minute as we speculate whether it took out Amarillo. Quickly losing count, everyone is sated after fifteen minutes and returns to bed.

November 29: With the purchase of Waddles the Penguin, Eleanor's budget is busted, but her beanie-baby-bedecked bookshelf bursts through the 45-beanie barrier.

2000 January 1: Still more than a year away, but already in our sights, Jeremy's bar mitzvah will confront the Y2K problem directly.

Best Wishes,

Eleanor

Jeremy

Karen

Carl

CMC/TEX