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Coming along the Santa Fé trail, in the vast plains of Kansas, Father Latour had found the sky more a desert than the land; a hard, empty blue, very monotonous to the eyes of a Frenchman. But west of the Pecos all that changed; here there was always activity overhead, clouds forming and moving all day long. Whether they were dark and full of violence, or soft and white with luxurious idleness, they powerfully affected the world beneath them. The desert, the mountains and mesas, were continually re-formed and re-coloured by the cloud shadows. The whole country seemed fluid to the eye under this constant change of accent, this ever-varying distribution of light.

— Willa Cather, *Death Comes for the Archbishop*

A New Mexico Diary

Saturday, January 1: Jeremy becomes a Bar Mitzvah today. He gives a rousing speech on how to avoid the enslavement the Israelites endured in Egypt. A free-lance AP reporter, accompanied by a news photographer, covers the service, the second U.S. Bar Mitzvah of the new millennium. We don't know in what papers the story will eventually appear, but it does run in the online edition of the Albuquerque Journal, which allows us to acquire an excellent still photo of Jeremy reading from the Torah, with his teachers and the cantor looking on.

Saturday, April 15: Jeremy competes in the State Science Fair at New Mexico Tech in Socorro, about 70 miles south of Albuquerque. He qualified for State by winning third place in the Behavioral Sciences competition at the Regional Science Fair in Albuquerque a month ago. Today he again wins third in Behavioral Sciences, but whereas he made off with \$235 in cash at Regionals, this time he gets no cash prizes. His project, entitled "Will Color Routes Route Terminus Routes?", tests whether it is easier to remember light-rail lines named after terminus stations or after colors. To carry out his project, he designed a light-rail system for Albuquerque, called SunRail, and then interviewed 53 people, probing their ability to remember several complicated trips on the system, each requiring multiple changes from one line to another. Although the data were consistent with his hypothesis that color names are easier to remember, he found that his sample wasn't large enough to reach a definitive conclusion.

Saturday, May 13: Carl, Jeremy, and Eleanor join most of Carl's immediate family in Houston, to watch as Carl's nephew Jeff graduates from Rice University. After the morning commencement ceremony, most of the party goes to a local water park, while Carl, Jeremy, Grandpa Caves, and Uncle Tom opt to see Cincinnati play Houston at the Astro's new downtown stadium, Enron Field. The park has a fancy retractable roof, a flag pole on the playing field in dead center, and a steam train that runs along the left field wall at the beginning of the game and after Astro home runs. We get what we paid for, as Cincinnati's Ken Griffey delivers two home runs. The first is bracketed by Tucker and Young home runs, these three in succession tying the score at 6–6 in the top of the 8th. Houston responds with a single run in the bottom of the 8th. In the top of the 9th, Houston ace reliever Billy Wagner strikes out the first two batters, then walks pinch hitter Dante Bichette, after a painfully long sequence of foul balls, to bring up Griffey. Griffey takes two strikes and then, with the entire crowd on its feet roaring, strokes a massive home run to left center. The crowd dies the minute the ball leaves the bat, except for Carl, who braves threats to life and limb to scream his appreciation to Ken. No fat ladies singing, Houston loads the bases in the bottom of the 9th against Cincinnati closer Scott Williamson, but the rally is snuffed out by a double play, leaving the Reds the winners, 8–7.

Sunday, May 28: When Karen was in Las Vegas in April, Jeremy, Eleanor, and Carl bought two pieces of original Peanuts art at the Chuck Jones Gallery in Santa Fe. One piece, a two-panel Charlie Brown cartoon, was presented at Mother's Day. The intention to surprise Karen failed utterly because Carl stupidly left the MasterCard receipt in his pants pocket. Everything works out for the best, however, because today the surprise is complete. With several friends at the house to participate in an early anniversary celebration, Carl surreptitiously hangs the second piece in place of the Mother's Day present and then suggests to Karen that she show off her new Peanuts art. She drags everyone into the dining room, points proudly to the spot, and nearly faints when she discovers a cell of Snoopy on top of his dog house, typing "It was a dark and stormy night"

Friday, June 30: Karen waits on the dock at Long Beach Harbor as the ferry steams in from Catalina Island, returning Eleanor to the mainland after five days at the Catalina Island Marine Institute. Although she admits to having missed Mom, Dad, and maybe even Jeremy, Eleanor proclaims immediately that she wants to return to CIMI next year. Lodging at the camp was in neat, white-stucco buildings with red tile roofs. Eleanor's cabin group of six girls was lucky enough to get a small cabin with its own bath facilities. The cabin counselor accompanied Eleanor's group to each activity, where a member of the camp staff provided detailed instruction—there was never a question the instructors couldn't answer. The girls learned to snorkel, visited the Institute's labs for fish, algae, sharks, plankton, and terrestrial animals, hiked to the highest point on the island, partied on the beach nearly every day, went on an oceanography cruise, and swam with harbor seals—all in five days, and the food was excellent, too! Now an experienced snorkeler, Eleanor hopes to teach Karen how to snorkel at the Great Barrier Reef.

Sunday, July 9: Karen, Carl, and Eleanor fly to LAX to meet Jeremy as he flies into LA from San Francisco. The family is gathering in LA to prepare for 24 hours of travel, beginning tomorrow morning, which will deposit us in Brisbane, Australia's third largest city. Jeremy has spent the last two weeks at a Jewish summer camp, Camp Newman, near Santa Rosa. His first postcard reads in part:

The camp is nice. Very foggy in morning, hot in afternoon. Food is okay. May lose alot of weight.
. . . Whole schedule is in Hebrew, so it's hard to tell what's next.

He enjoyed the daily games of Ultimate Frisbee, the card games, and the overnight camping excursion, and he had an especially good time with his friend Aaron Oster-Beal, from Denver, who joined him at camp. On arrival the camp administration confiscated the campers' return airline tickets, on the sensible grounds that the campers would be likely to lose them. Today the camp administration can't find Jeremy's ticket and has to buy a replacement ticket to get him to LA. You're probably wondering why he doesn't have an electronic ticket. We wondered the same thing and asked American Airlines—repeatedly—to provide one, but their computer never wavered from its initial position, consistently refusing to cough up electronic tickets for a five-leg, four-Qantas-leg, frequent-flier-financed itinerary.

Saturday, July 15: We're at the Tangalooma Wild Dolphins Resort on Moreton Island, just off the coast at Brisbane. Since arriving in Oz last Tuesday, Carl has begun work at the University of Queensland, and Karen, Jeremy, and Eleanor have plunged into full time touring—they've already seen the Australian Woolshed, Sea World, and Brisbane's South Bank. Yesterday we were joined by our good friend Abby Hellwarth, who will be traveling with us for the rest of the trip. Today we take a boat to Moreton Island, and this evening we feed wild dolphins near the Tangalooma pier. Seven dolphins show up for the feeding, and each of us feeds a particular one.

Sunday, July 16: If a day at the beach leaves you desperate to get away from all that sand, Moreton Island is not the place for you. The whole island is sand. It's the second largest sand island in the world (No. 1 and No. 3 are close by, sand islands being a Queensland specialty). Today we go sand tobogganing in the "desert". The island is heavily forested, despite being made wholly of sand, but the desert is a small area of bare sand, with one big sand dune about 50 meters high. We slide down the steep side of the dune on masonite slabs, reaching speeds of 35 mph. It's exhilarating, a little too much so for Karen, who doesn't like sliding down hills at high speed, and Abby, who kicks up a storm of sand, a good part of which ends up in her mouth, but Jeremy, Carl, and Eleanor get in as many slides as they can, given that each ride requires chugging up that same steep 50-meter sand slope. Here's a helpful hint should you decide to do your own sand tobogganing: remove all valuables from your pockets; otherwise, after a slide or two, you will have exchanged them for nothing but pocketsfull of sand.

Tuesday, July 25: We're in Darwin, the capital of Oz's Northern Territory and the cultural and administrative center of The Top End. It's the Dry, so we don't have to worry about rain, but it gets hot every day even though it's the middle of winter. We spent the last four days on a tour of major sights in The Top End. On Friday we saw Litchfield National Park, with its termite mounds, green-buttled ants, poisonous ironwood trees (don't use ironwood twigs to stir your tea if you want to survive the drinking), grevilleas whose orange flowers taste like honey, and waterfalls plunging into deep, pellucid pools. We swam in the pool at the foot of Wangi Falls, the experience heightened by the remote possibility of encountering an estuarine crocodile—the fabled man-eating "salties" that intrude into one's consciousness anywhere near water in The Top End. We ended the day at the Springvale Homestead just west of Katherine, where we signed up for a crocodile-spotting evening cruise along the Katherine River. We saw several of the relatively harmless freshwater crocs—"freshies"—and enjoyed a riverside dinner of bush stew and the dense, but delicious bush bread called damper. After dinner we watched as one of the guides fed a freshie that is habituated to having dinner after the tourists. On Saturday we boated, scrambled over rocks, and floated through the first five gorges of the spectacular Katherine Gorge in Nitmiluk National Park (see photo), seeing plenty of freshies along the way. On Sunday and Monday we were in enormous Kakadu National Park. We again swam in an inviting, yet vaguely menacing pool, we viewed the amazing concentration of wildlife at Yellow Water Wetlands on the South Alligator River, mainly birds, but including a sprinkling of salties, and we peered at the ancient aboriginal rock paintings at Nourlangie Rock and Ubirr. At Yellow Water we camped in tent cabins, and just as Eleanor fell asleep, she had the stimulating experience, which she shared with all of us, of having a sugar glider scamper across her sleeping bag. None of us wants to contemplate what was running around in the tent after we were all sound asleep. Today we're shopping in Darwin, mainly for aboriginal art. Turtles are the theme: Eleanor buys a didgeridoo decorated with turtles, Jeremy acquires an aboriginal painting of four muscular turtles, and Karen and Carl select a carved and painted wooden turtle.

Friday, July 29: We get up at 5:00 am, break camp an hour later, clamber onto the tour bus, drive through the pre-dawn dark, and hike quickly along a rough, half-mile trail, all so we can see the sun rise from the Valley of the Winds at the center of the Olgas (Kata Tjuta), a set of rounded, red monoliths jutting out of the desert 20 miles west of Ayers Rock (Uluru). Yesterday we walked halfway around Uluru and then watched the famous sunset show as the Rock is transformed from flaming orange to the red of dying embers to the deep black of night. It's cold at night here in the Red Center, temperatures plunging as soon as the sun sets and dipping to just below freezing before dawn. It's also clear and nearly free of artificial lighting. Before going to bed, we behold the Milky Way, splashed across the sky with a splendor unknown in the Northern Hemisphere, and waking up well before dawn, we discover the dim fuzziness of the two Magellanic Clouds rising in the east.

Saturday, August 5: Our good luck with the weather runs out on Great Keppel Island, at the southern end of the Great Barrier Reef. Persistent squalls sweep across the island, but we take advantage of every sunny spell between the storms. Having practiced snorkeling yesterday in a protected area just off the main beach, we hike today to a nearby beach to see some of the coral fringing the island. In frigid water—everyone but Carl has the good sense to rent a wet suit—we succeed in swimming about 50 yards from the beach to a patch of coral and watch as a turtle grazes lazily over its surface. The rain and wind return, and we retreat to our room for a welcome cup of tea. Getting a good look at the Reef will have to await another trip to Oz.

Wednesday August 9: The entire party leaves Oz, except Carl, who will stay on for another ten days. We hope to return to see more of Australia, all of us agreeing that Oz is the only country we've visited that we would think about moving to. There will, however, be a period of adjustment before we can be understood at home. Here's a typical exchange from near the end of our visit, after we had mastered the Oz dialect, called 'Strine.

After brekkie, let's put on the sunnies, pack the esky with coldies and sammies, grab a few tinnies, and head for the beach nearest Brizzie.

Yeah, for dinner we can cook steak and sausage on the barbie just like Aussies—we might even broil some bugs—and the smoke will drive off the mozzies.

If you got through that successfully (translation, accompanied by a lifetime supply of Vegemite, available on request), you're prepared to play it cool—no worries, mate!—when your dinner companion asks for "dead horse" (we're talking tomato sauce, the closest Oz equivalent to ketchup, so named because, in 'Strine anyway, "dead horse" rhymes with "red sauce").

Thursday, August 10: Everything is fine at home, except for Carl's designed-to-be-bear-proof bird-feeder hanger. Installed just last November at considerable cost in labor and cash, it is bent to the ground like a piece of spaghetti.

Sunday, September 24: Jeremy and Carl, spending the weekend in Denver with the Oster-Beals, wake to find two inches of wet snow on the ground. The snow provides ammunition for a rousing early-season snowball fight involving Larry, Aaron, Martha, Jeremy, and Carl. Yesterday served up another early taste of winter at Coors Field. The temperature hovering just under 40° F, the Rockies-Marlins game began in drizzle and ended in a drenching rain in the bottom of the 7th, with the Rockies threatening, the Marlins ahead, and only the most diehard fans still in the stadium.

Saturday, October 21: When Eleanor's glasses broke in Oz, we outfitted her with new ones and with expensive and outrageously cool clip-on sunglasses (see photo) to fit the new frames. Today she decides to shed her glasses in favor of contact lenses. She looks great and still intends to use her Oz glasses occasionally, but the sunglasses are now available along with the Vegemite.

Sunday, October 29: Most of Carl's family is in Albuquerque to help Carl and Snoopy celebrate a joint Big Five-Oh this evening. The day begins with most of the group floating above the city in Al Lowenstein's hot-air balloon, Sunset Rise. It's a perfect day for ballooning, nearly windless, pleasantly crisp, with puffy, white clouds dotting an azure sky. The views over the city and beyond seem to run on forever. The birthday party begins at 6:00 pm. The house groans under the weight of nine tons of people—that's about 130—but there's plenty of food, thanks to Karen's careful planning. Nonstop cooking over the last week produced four turkeys and six briskets, and other goodies, including green chile stew, are also available in abundance. The desserts are served on what looks to be a new dining table in the den, but it's actually a pool table, Carl's birthday present. For the party it's topped by the ping pong extension—Jeremy won the Caves family tournament yesterday—which is covered by a tablecloth.

Friday, November 24: Accompanied by cousin David, we drive to Fort Bragg on the Mendocino coast to take the Skunk Train. Arriving just in time, we grab a quick lunch, hop on the train, proceed through the darkest tunnel we've ever encountered, and then enjoy a slow ride through a forest of towering coast redwoods to a turnaround point at Northspur. We're in the Bay Area for the Thanksgiving Break to see Karen's brother Ken and family and to take in some Northern California scenery. All of us are staying at the Trojan Horse, a bed-and-breakfast in Sonoma. While we're on the train, Ken and Mary enjoy the spa at Calistoga.

Sunday, December 17: As Eleanor practices on the French horn, which she started playing in school band this fall, she notices that her prized turtle, Sherlock Holmes, acquired in 1997, is dead in his tank. Far from his birthplace in Wisconsin, Sherlock found a home in a New Mexico bedroom. We bury him respectfully in a cardboard box beneath a piñon, near the graves of several fish.

Best Wishes,

Eleanor

Jeremy

Karen

Carl

CMC/TEX

P.S. The photo shows the four of us, all flashing award-winning smiles and all but Jeremy wearing sunnies, cruising through the Katherine Gorge in Oz's Northern Territory. Thanks to Abby Hellwarth for the photo.