

CARLTON M. CAVES AND KAREN L. KAHN
22 EAGLE NEST COURT NE
ALBUQUERQUE, NEW MEXICO 87122-2025
(505) 856-6522

1995 November 25

A New Mexico Diary

1994 December 23: A wintry dusk, clouds stretching from horizon to horizon, the light grey and diffuse. The Sun hides from those hurrying along I-25, deep in the Rio Grande Valley, first behind clouds and then, as it sets, behind the West Mesa. Suddenly, a narrow band stretching along the base of the Sandias flares the deep red of dying embers. The Sun, reluctant to surrender in this Land of the Sun, has found a crack between clouds and earth and lit a lingering fire, which fades slowly and then goes out.

1995 January 22: Jeremy celebrates his eighth birthday with an airplane party at our house. Nine boys are checked in by flight attendant Eleanor, pass through Jeremy's security system, and board the Concorde at 1:20 pm for a record-setting five-minute flight to visit the Left Bank in Paris. There follows a whirlwind schedule—the Boeing factory in Seattle, an air race in Oshkosh, film making in Hollywood, airplane bingo in Las Vegas, pizza in Rome, a red chile piñata in Mexico City, the Smithsonian Air and Space Museum in Washington, D.C., cake and ice cream in Copenhagen, present opening at the North Pole—all choreographed so exquisitely by Karen that the party returns safely to Albuquerque at 4:30 pm, only ten minutes behind schedule after 38,500 miles in the air.

1995 February 17: Eleanor and friend Heather, each celebrating a sixth birthday, sponsor a Swan Princess skating party at the Outpost Ice Arena near our house. Fun is had by all, despite the reality that ice is hard and cold when you fall on it. Those six and under exhibit substantial improvement by the end of the 90-minute skating session. With everybody suitably hungry, the party proceeds, after a rousing chorus of "Happy Birthday," to the consumption of ice cream and two cakes. As the guests depart, the sponsoring parents survey the wreckage, thankful that it's not at either of their houses.

1995 March 18: During a two-week trip to Israel, Carl visits Masada, where every aspect commands attention. The setting—a mesa surrounded by steep cliffs, overlooking the Dead Sea 2,500 feet below to the east—has the grand and desolate beauty of the American Southwest. Here Herod the Great directs the building of an enormous palace-fortress—what power, to command the necessary human and material resources, and what megalomania, to use them. To this fortress, seventy-five years later, come remnants of the Jewish revolt of 66–70 CE. In 72–73 CE they face the grim implacability of imperial Rome, determined to crush the last vestige of opposition. From three campsites, still plainly visible on the desert floor, the Romans build an enormous earthen ramp up the west side of the mesa and prepare to overrun the fortress. The 967 Jewish defenders, as determined as the Romans, commit mass suicide to avoid the humiliation and degradation of falling into Roman hands. One understands—and shudders in the understanding—why Rome ruled the Mediterranean for five centuries.

1995 April 16: April, the month that tries New Mexico's soul. Brisk winds and repeated outbreaks of wintry weather—it is snowing as this is written on April 19—make summer seem far away, though it surely arrives in just a few weeks. We risk a day trip to Tent Rocks, on the south flank of the Jemez Mountains, a landscape littered with enormous cone-shaped formations eroded out of the Bandelier tuff. On departure from Albuquerque the sky is an ominous grey, with a forecast of high winds, but our gamble pays off at Tent Rocks. The tents, white or a delicate orange, stand out against a brilliant blue sky, dotted with puffy white clouds. We ascend a narrow canyon cut deep into the tuff—so narrow at one place as to permit only single-file travel—and emerge onto a high mesa with grand views of the Sangre de Cristos and the Sandias. We return to Albuquerque thankful for a beautiful April day.

1995 May 20: Two outs. Man on second. Bottom of the last inning. Cardinals trailing the Marlins 7–5. Jeremy Caves steps to the plate. A good singles hitter, Jeremy knows that won't be enough; the next batter has contacted the ball only once all season. A sharp grounder to shortstop. A wild throw to first. Another wild throw into the outfield. Jeremy rounds the bases with his first home run, as pandemonium breaks loose in the Cardinals' dugout. The Cardinals prevail 8–7 after one extra inning.

1995 May 26: Karen organizes the end-of-year party for Eleanor's kindergarten class at Manzano Day School. The year is 2025, and the former kindergarten comrades assemble in Ms. Burrell's classroom, dressed in their work clothes and ready to share the experiences of 30 years. A mathematician, asked the sum of two and two, replies, "Twenty-two"—arithmetic of the future. Eleanor is a famous author with a complicated personal life, apparently married to two of her former classmates. Karen is Queen of the United States, democratic government having foundered in the flood of disinformation from conservative talk shows. Jeremy makes a special appearance as an aging major league pitcher from Albuquerque, which emerged with a franchise in the Continental League after the disastrous lockout of '04 led to the demise of the National and American Leagues. An interesting 30 years, but why couldn't Eleanor have added the trillionaire to her list of husbands?

1995 August 6: On our way to Madison, Wisconsin, we arrive at the Albuquerque airport at 5:15 am. Ahead of us as dawn breaks is the excitement of exploring American Airline's hubs and spokes, with convenient stops at both Dallas and Chicago. Suddenly Eleanor's first loose tooth breaks free and falls out painlessly. Surprised and embarrassed but happy, Eleanor makes sure the tooth will accompany us to Wisconsin, where the tooth fairy hides her reward deep in the bed clothes, but turns out to be just as generous as her New Mexico counterpart.

1995 August 13: Homeward bound from Wisconsin. Carl's brother Doug has a second home on the Wisconsin River, where we have spent a week with Grandpa and Grandma Caves, Uncle Doug and Aunt Sherry, and cousins Kevin, Jeff, and Josie. The main activity, playing in the river (there's nothing like a game of frisbee on a shallow sand bar), is supplemented by canoeing, horseback riding, a few brats (bratwursts if you're not from Wisconsin), and side trips to view every species of crane at the International Crane Foundation and to see the Brewers lose to Toronto. Making her way from river to house in a swimsuit one afternoon, Eleanor blunders into a deceptively pretty patch of stinging nettles and commences a howling impressive for both volume and duration; she comes away with an appreciation of the undisguised menace of New Mexico's cacti. The best part of the trip is the river itself—protean yet timeless—reminding us, like an ocean or a mountain range, that we and our everyday concerns are small and ephemeral. Shall we have the wisdom to preserve such reminders?

1995 August 14: Back in New Mexico, we are welcomed by a cloudy morning, the clouds interrupted by patches of purest blue. The Sun, just emerging above the Sandias, plays tag with the mesas west of the city, spotlighting each in turn, as though they were the subjects of a celestial lecture.

1995 September 21: A new digital piano. Jeremy and Eleanor begin piano lessons with an enthusiasm that we hope to sustain. Carl resumes piano playing after a 25-year interregnum. The piano, scarcely taller than its keyboard, fits into an otherwise unused and unusable nook in the dining room, which offers a splendid view of the Sandias. The digital feels and sounds like a piano, at least to our unpracticed hands and ears, though it imitates other instruments when asked. Perhaps best of all, one can practice in the privacy of headphones, saving ears and egos at the same time.

1995 October 15: Eleanor declares she wants to hike the La Luz Trail—from bottom to top, no less. Jeremy and Carl, not wanting to miss an historic event, volunteer to accompany her. The trail winds up the west face of the Sandia Mountains, just behind our house, ascending 3,400 feet in just over seven miles. Embarking after lunch, we climb through desert scrub and pine forest to the upper reaches of La Luz Canyon (see photo). There we discover aspen gold shimmering amidst the dark green of firs, all set against a background of pink Sandia granite and a cloudless blue sky. Eleanor has picked the perfect autumn day. We move on reluctantly, but quickly, and reach the crest station of the Sandia Peak Tram a few minutes before sunset. The Sun plunges below the western horizon, taking the temperature with it, as we board the tram for the fifteen-minute ride to the bottom.

Best Wishes,

Eleanor

Jeremy

Karen

Carl

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