

December 29, 1995

Last night I flew west from Indianapolis to Champaign-Urbana in a tiny commuter plane, into a setting sun that is very low on the horizon this time of year. All of the passengers were evidently strangers, so there was no conversation, just the roar of the engines. With one eye on the pilot to make sure he knew what he was doing, and another on the flat white landscape below, I had plenty of time to wax philosophical.

For five years I've landed at our little airport and wondered when I was going to drop into this corner of the Midwest and call it Home. But finally that moment seemed upon me. The streets were deserted because the students were all blessedly gone, the Corky's limo driver was friendly. As I stopped at the supermarket I ran into an acquaintance (a very likely event in this small town, there are no secrets here), an Iraqi expatriate who runs an ethnic grocery with a Palestinian partner and Indian clerks. He gave me an update on their latest venture, a combination Indian-Middle Eastern restaurant, and you'll be pleased to know business is good. Then, I realized that while we were gone for the holidays, not one but *two* Thai restaurants had opened. Added to this, I remembered that, a few miles from the house we have a new Barnes and Noble Bookstore, no cause for celebration in Cambridge, but not bad here. And the beauty of it is, we never have to drive anywhere, so we spend no time in traffic jams.

Of course, the terrain outside of town, or lack of it, still presents a problem. But while in Cape Cod this summer we acquired a Sunfish, a 14 foot sailboat. When out sailing on one of the nearby person-made lakes, if we went around the corner and out of sight of the nuclear power plant and squinted in the direction of a line of trees, we could imagine ourselves to be on Gull Pond in Wellfleet.

So yes, I'm willing to admit, I've come to terms with being stuck in the Middle. The others never had as much trouble as I did, so they're all fine, I'm just a slow learner. But this is not to say that home is not elsewhere as well; our hearts are scattered along with dear friends and family. So we hit the road a good bit this past year. In brief...

Chip and I spent six wonderful days of the University spring break in Jalisco and Guanajuato, Mexico, leaving the kids behind with a willing grad student. Every moment of that trip was delightful, since we both take great pleasure in all things Mexican. As is often the case, we arrived home convinced that we would forever-more eat our pineapple, mangoes and watermelon with lime, salt and chile. I planned to paint the bedroom terracotta and turquoise, and hang pictures of the *Virgen de Guadalupe* I've collected here and there. But somehow those thoughts fizzled. Now that we're just back from California, however, I'm inspired again. We could use a little color here...

April the kids and I spent a pleasant week with my family in California. Mid-summer the kids elected to go to Spanish camp in Bemidji, Minnesota, about 800 miles north. Chip and I hunkered down in a cabin on an island in a lake near the Canadian border. With kerosene lanterns and an outhouse, we were unaware that Minnesota had suffered the storm of the century, and that lightning had killed a scout leader not far from us. (Eerily, this was the same area where a guide on Chip's boy scout canoe trip was killed by lightning 33 years ago.) We gathered up the kids after 5 days and listened to Spanish songs, flawlessly sung, all 800 miles home.

Late summer we took what has become a familiar route East, via Chip's sister Susan in Philadelphia, my sister Karen in New Jersey, Aunt Polly's seaside retreat on the Cape, and Boston. Each time we make this trip we spend too little time with people

and agonize that we should really move back. But then there's the rest of the family in California and Texas. And the jobs here. We often envy those who have both sides of their families in one locality, or at least one state. It seems not to have been our fate. Thus this annual form letter.

November Aunt Polly celebrated her 90th birthday, so most of Chip's family gathered for a fête on Cape Cod at Thanksgiving. We had a grand time, eating and giving thanks for a life well-lived. Two weeks later there was more celebrating, this time in recognition of my parents' 50th wedding anniversary. My mother was certain that an insufficient number of their friends had survived to make a party, but lo and behold, 65 showed up to honor them. (The tributes in the scrapbook I pulled together for the event made me hope we can do as well in the year 2032, but we'd better make some good New Year's resolutions to ensure longevity.) My siblings and I had invited her schoolmates Olivia de Havilland and Joan Fontaine, but Joan had pneumonia and Olivia lives in Paris, so Emily, who aspires to an acting career ("in the theater, you know") wasn't destined to meet them. Many of the guests who did come were my former high school teachers (my mother worked at the school). They all looked pretty good, but that's the kind of reunion designed to make one feel very old! On the other hand, we were able to spend some time getting to know my brother Kent and sister-in-law Cyndi's 15 month old Megan, a little charmer who will keep us young at heart for many years.

We have the usual news on the work front: Chip works too hard, but mostly enjoys it, I have a new position, still in Education, but involving more proposal-writing and fund-raising for research projects. The big news is a sabbatical planned for next year. We're very likely heading to Australia, though some of our plans are still up in the air, and we're considering other possibilities. The kids are alternately excited and apprehensive. Stephen, who isn't crazy about change, would like us to just do a summer, but we're hoping to make the prospect sweeter for him somehow. Once our plans are worked out, we'll probably send a group letter this spring, just one of about a hundred things we'll need to do as payment for our year away.

Our kids could constitute a string duet now, Emily on violin and Stephen on cello, singing all the while, since they both continue with school choir. Or they could play a little piano for you, if you happened by. They find time for soccer too, though unfortunately on different teams this year. There are times when Stephen has a game at one end of town and Emily at the other, and that's when we *do* drive. This is our last year at their elementary school of which we are very fond. That's unless we homeschool next year, in which case we might sign up young Stephen for fifth grade upon our return.

For those online, I'd suggest checking out our homepages, but I fear we've been delayed in finishing them. Stephen is the farthest along, but then he always is, when it comes to computing. But we love email, words of advice or gossip, on any subject: sbruce@uiuc.edu, or chip@uiuc.edu. We live our lives on email now, I fear. Chip had 150 messages waiting after a two week absence, and I was nearly as bad.

That's probably about enough for now. Do stop by, all of you scattered friends and relations, next time you're within a few hundred miles.

With affection,  
Susan, on behalf of Chip, Emily and Stephen Bruce