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Estes Park Postcard

Posted: 07/17/2012 7:00 am

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I wish you were here, Mary, in Estes Park, the way it was when we were kids. It's another warm day, like those lazy summers we spent down in the creek, searching for minnows. I'm sitting on the patio watching high clouds sail overhead, blue sky, not a trace of smoke blowing over from the forest fires in Colorado Springs and Wyoming. I'm sure you've seen it on the news.

Even the pines seem a richer brown and deeper green than usual. I can't see Longs Peak -- there's a puffy cloud over the summit -- but the Mummy Range is clear. Our long-lost second-cousins from Buenos Aires are here and taking it all in. We hiked to Mills Lake yesterday and showed them the columbine blooming in the shade where the trail forks to Loch Vale.



I finally framed that Rocky Mountain National Park poster, the one we bought at the Trail Ridge Road shop so long ago. I had to make do with what we've got here, so I trimmed the poster to fit into a thrift store frame, with a "re-purposed" poster from another thrift store frame for a mat. It

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looks pretty good in the corner bedroom, a splash of color against the pine paneling.

Which reminds me: Mary, if you ever see one of those toy pistol-and-holster sets at a swap meet, would you pick it up? Like the ones Mother hung on the bedroom wall? The kids think that retro cowboy décor is cool. Plus it would match the cow hide from Brazil, which is now on the floor. Wish you were here to share it.

I have nothing that I MUST do today but sit under the pines and listening to the wind blowing. Which it is, too much, unfortunately. The fire danger is still high and if a spark ignites the pine needles, the blaze would be unstoppable. Rain is forecast for tomorrow and everyone's holding his/her breath, hoping.



We've seen more elk than usual for this time of year. Two males with big antlers emptied the bird bath outside the dining room window, then wandered down to the creek and lay in the shade under a cluster of aspen. They don't like the heat, even at this altitude (7,500 feet), but the bird bath was the closest water. The chipmunks and ground squirrels are surviving on dew. And they're bolder than ever, fat cheeks stuffed with stores for the winter. Same thing for the rabbits, hopping everywhere. A western tanager, bright red head, yellow body and black wings, landed on the bird feeder just now. He's the first one I've seen this summer.

Steve found a perfect bird feeder in the thrift shop. It has an indestructible metal top, controlled seed release, a nice perch all around. Both bird feeders are finally filled and up, suspended 12 feet off the ground on a wire between two trees. No bears yet, and I hope we won't see any. Last year a young male came by, stood up on the rock, reached up and batted the feeders down. The National Park rangers and Estes Park officials are telling people not to use bird feeders at all. (Ours is, I'm afraid, a wildlife no-no.)



Bears are a regular sight in the National Park, according to Rhoda, who's driving the shuttle buses up to the Bear Lake parking area. If you drive your own car to Bear Lake at the crack of dawn you can park near the trail heads. Otherwise, buses are the only transportation during the current road widening effort.

The project is *way* behind, a volunteer ranger told me. The skinny is that the construction company could have worked most of last winter when the Front Range was abnormally warm and dry. But they didn't get their permits in on time. So now, with a record number of visitors entering the National Park, everybody is screwed -- residents, hikers and day-trippers. You have to park in a new big lot at the Moraine Park Museum and board the shuttle there.



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Our bus waited for 40 minutes before the cement trucks had dumped their load and the single lane road was reopened. It could have been hot and miserable in the bus. But Rhoda was a wonder, asking people where they were from, explaining the situation and pointing out a couple of deer under the trees. The ride felt more like a day camp outing. People talked to each other, compared their hiking boots, their lodging arrangements, their day packs, even gas prices.

A lady from Spain suddenly realized she'd left her camera on a bench near the ranger station and Rhoda radioed the other bus drivers to look for it. When they found it, a cheer went up. It was heart-warming, seeing how nice people really can be. Not a word of complaint from anyone, though I admit thinking dark thoughts about unacceptable delays and over-budget government construction contracts.

It's quiet and calm here, away from houses, roads and traffic. Restorative is the word. I didn't think I'd ever say it, but dusting and polishing is soothing. Making the beds first thing and straightening up is my happy pill, better than Xanax. When everything is in its place, order reigns and the day starts on the right foot. I wonder if that's how the soldiers in Afghanistan make it through, with each day planned and ordered by their commander (even when so fearfully life-threatening).

Then one day it's over and they're sitting at home on the sofa, adrift, with no routine. I wonder if mandatory post-deployment camps -- like boot camp -- would work, six-week-long stints where the guys would stay together for a daily schedule of structured civilian tasks? Stuff like doing laundry, washing dishes, painting the barracks, take a class with homework, cutting the lawn, planting trees, grocery shopping at the PX, talk sessions centered on shared memories. These would be life tasks to continue when they finally got home. If you've got influence with anybody -- senator, the army, billionaire friends -- float the idea.



Enough: I've got a story due and my editor is waiting. It's nice not to have TV, and even the radio cuts out in the sticks. We're got internet service, of course, but I rarely use it, except for this. We're living in perfect ignorance and peace, relaxed for the first time in months. It's my own version of post-deployment camp, I guess. Back to the basics, with time to think and sort (as it were) the wheat from the chaff. Love you.



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