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Cosmic Raccoon September 2007

I am happy to announce that the Center of the Known Universe has moved a little west--to Monmouth, Oregon where recycling is an acceptable activity, where I have used one tank of gas in six weeks, and when you do need to fill up, they pump your gas for you. I've observed that every place is so close together, (unlike Mancos where it was nine hours to Denver and ten to Phoenix) it's easier to walk, unlike in Mancos where on account of the bear and the skunks you couldn't walk—you had to RUN.

It's interesting living in Monmouth. There's no Sam's club and the nearest Walmart is miles and miles. In little old downtown, the local ice cream shop serves Tillamook Ice Cream, and of course coffee shops abound. My dogs take 3 walks a day, but Henry is still like an old forcibly-retired guy who doesn't know what to do with himself.

Once again I live in a house with no doorbell, so that at least gives Henry one important job to do. I enjoy the WOU campus about fifty feet north, with its manicured lawns and open parking lots where Emily can chase the ball like lightning. Henry is certain there is a squirrel there with his name on it and so we spend a lot of time looking up into trees.

I miss the sunsets from the front porch in Mancos, and there are no blue corn tortillas anywhere. On the bright side, cars stop for pedestrians. People remember your name. There's music in the park on Wednesdays. A real old fashioned drive-in theater in Dallas. And a Mexican pañaderia where I can bone up on my Español.

People don't lock their bikes. They also don't seem to lock their doors, either. Recycling, and an attitude of gratitude is everywhere evident. It's the most dog

friendly state in the union according to some. People lock their cars, though, because otherwise you get tomatoes and corn and zucchini (which nobody can spell) left in the front seat. There is a huge Spanish population, but no Hatch green chile. Go figure.

I'm surprised at being able to get the cooking channel in my rental house so I've watched Good Eats and Feasting on Asphalt (I saw the Mancos episode) until I have fallen in love with Alton Brown's show. It is followed by the absolutely unreal Sandra Lee with her color-coordinated kitchen (she changes the wallpaper to match her recipes—this is definitely a woman with too much time on her hands.) It's only a matter of time before there is a Jack Prelutsky Cooking Show and the Red Green Hour of Feasting From Your Manifold.

My next door neighbor is a master gardener and I feel like I'm living out an episode of Rapunzel. Her garden is exquisite, delightful, and surrounded by a six foot wooden fence. So I peer through the cracks and lust after her roses and her truck garden. There are tons of tomatoes at the local farmers markets—of which there are many. Also an abundance of marion berries which grow wild by the roadside, and the pears are just coming into their prime too. I've also found the library is great, and there are lots of books on tape. So I have to share with you that I have great news! The old Rabbit Ears series of stories (originally from Windham Hill) are being reissued as CDs by Listening Library. Among the highlights in this series are Brer Rabbit told by Danny Glover, Pecos Bill read by Robin Williams, and The Steadfast Tin Soldier read by Jeremy Irons. And the REAL (i.e. NOT Disney) Pinocchio read by Danny Aiello with original music by Les Miserables Brass Band. These are great to travel with, or just to listen to while you are NOT watching television. I do hope you will consider telling your kids "no television before school" and either read to them or plug these Rabbit Ears stories into your CD player.

If you have ever bought a really dreadful CD with what you thought was going to be listenable, I can sympathize. You don't need ice picks in your ears. Listening Library is terrific, and offers every imaginable kid's novel on CD. Among their new titles, Madeleine L'Engle reads Wrinkle in Time, Wind in the Door and Swiftly Tilting Planet. I may have to take another long trip in the car with these. They provide about 20 hours of listening which ought to just get me to Mancos.

In the Fine Listening Dept, I am happ that Robin Arquette (Lois Duncan's daughter) still offers a cassette of "Songs from Dreamland" with lots of original lullabies. It was one of the best-sellers at my bookstore, and I just found out it was still available so I have to share the good news. For new babies, for old babies, for babies trapped in the car, for babies trying to fight off sleep, this is a great tape. If you want to hear

samples, go to www.lullabysongs.net. Order a couple of copies because I guarantee you'll find yourself giving away two for every copy you keep. It's that good.

Also in the new Listening Library titles you'll find the "Old original" Nancy Drews. I'm still hoping to find a copy of *The Clue of the Leaning Chimney*, which was my all-time favorite. If that doesn't make you feel old, you just haven't been watching enough cable television and haven't seen the commercial featuring Depeche Mode in their collapsible camping cup headgear.

Speaking of camping, I was thinking back this time of year when I was a girl scout for about three days (until my mother found out there was a hefty investment in uniforms, not to mention that pesky business about rendering service to others and she yanked me out) and the troop went camping at Montgomery County Park about fifteen miles from home, which was the furthest into the western wilderness I had ever been allowed. The tents were old Sibley canvas jobbers, and since sleeping bags were nonexistent in my family, it was multiple blankets and a chenille bedspread that the dog had ruined. No flashlight was fearsome enough to frighten off the daddy longlegs that marched in phalanxes out of the darkness, drawn to us by the aroma of Evening in Paris and roasted marshmallows. It rained, of course, because this was late August in Pennsylvania. And I was miserable. I fell to thinking, "I could be at the beach now, doing paint by number pictures and sitting on the beach."

So it was a real treat this past month to go to the beach to meet up with some old friends from South Dakota and my son and his girlfriend and watch people enjoying the sand, the surf and using camping gear. It just made my old heart glad. It never EVER occurred to any of the Spencers to set up a tent at the beach in New Jersey. It would have made perfect sense, but it just never occurred to us because none of us owned a tent I suppose. It always amazes me when a concept like this smacks me upside the head.

It's like reading a Philip Gulley book. He comes up with these insights that just astonish and surprise me. In his newest, *"Porch Talk: Stories of Decency, Common Sense, and Other Endangered Species (2007, Harpercollins)"* he makes some astonishingly true observations that elevate him to high office in my regard: when porches were no longer a standard feature on new-built homes, stupidity increased exponentially. And when locally owned hardware stores closed, pushed into expiration by Lowe's and Home Depot, men all over the country went into a deep depression from which they have not yet recovered.

I also recommend Bill Roorbach's "Writing Life Stories: How to Make Memories into Memoirs, Ideas into Essays, and Life Into Literature" which is very good for anyone starting the lighthearted task of writing your life (where do you start? what do you include? what do you do about the truth? who do you tell lies about?) this is a wonderful guide to getting those morning pages done (every morning, ten minutes minimum, write unedited zero drafts.) Which I do in my little teeny tiny house where all the rooms slant one way or another, but it's okay because you have to walk close to the walls anyway so when you tip over, you don't fall down.

My teeny tiny slanty kitchen in my teeny tiny house like Mrs. Piggly Wiggle's domain has a teensy tiny "pocket" kitchen with about ten inches of counter space. It poses a culinary challenge, sort of like cooking in a Sibley tent. I have taken the bait and risen to the task at hand. Forthwith, a new recipe:

Low Salt White Lasagna from Gwynne's "Pocket Kitchen"

Ingredients

- 1 container Ricotta
- 1 container small curd cottage cheese
- 1 bundle fresh spinach, washed and chopped
- 1 package ground turkey
- 1 package queso fresca
- 1 package shredded parmesan-and-mozzarella
- 1 leek, chopped fine
- 1 clove garlic minced
- 1 leek
- 1 stick butter
- 1 package sliced fresh mushrooms
- 1 package lasagna noodles

Equipment

- large bowl for mixing
- large pot for boiling lasagna noodles
- deep lasagna pan (10x13x2inches)
- baking sheet
- fork
- frying pan

Directions

Boil a very large pot of water to cook the lasagna noodles. Start the noodles when you start cooking the turkey. Cook the ground turkey in your large frying pan with minced garlic and minced leek on medium heat. Add mushrooms (you can leave these out if you want.) Add butter. Let cool. In your papa bear bowl, where you have dumped the ricotta and cottage cheese, add turkey mixture and moosh it all together. You could also add green chile if you can get it, lucky you. After this is all nicely combined, add chopped spinach and moosh some more. Put a layer of cooked lasagna noodles in the bottom of pan (tongs are helpful here). Add a nice layer of meat and cheese goop and smoosh it down with a fork. Add thin slices of queso fresco, then another layer of noodles, another layer of turkey glop, another layer of queso fresco, another layer of noodles, ending with a thin layer of turkey stuff topped with queso fresco and shredded parmesan-mozzarella. Put in oven on a baking sheet (to catch the drips) and bake at 325° about an hour, until the top starts to brown. Then turn down to 250° and bake another hour. Let it cool for at least an hour before you serve it. Obviously, this is NOT a quick dinner. But on the bright side, you can make it a day ahead and reheat it. If you divide it up into one-portion pieces and freeze in ziplock baggies, you can nuke it for a minute at half-blast for lunch.

Until next month, I hope all of you will take a few minutes to visit www.cookingupreading.com and see some of the yummy ways to make reading fashionable AND delectable. Please share this information with your local librarians and teachers!

Speaking of which, I know I've moved back to America because school here starts after Labor Day and Halloween stuff comes out after the school supplies sales are over. And just in case you needed to know that you are getting really really old, it's a sure thing when the goofy clothes you wore in Junior High show up on the Halloween Costume rack at Goodwill. Till October....Gwynne