

We had a disastrous Fourth. We had two goals: ride the chairlift in Red River and watch the fireworks in Eagle Nest. (Look at a map!)

So this seemed simple enough...but getting the Grubbs out of bed on vacation is difficult. Even Emma sleeps in past 8-ish, and then there's still a breakfast to make and a kitchen to clean...Anyway, we made it to the chair lift, but it was raining. (It rained here every day of our vacation, just like it did in Ft. Worth, but at least I didn't have to trapse across the campus every morning, noon, and afternoon.)

So we waited for the rain to end in Red River...thought we might need a sweatshirt...which of course I had not thought to bring with me...finally decided to duck out into the rain and find a sweatshirt shop...not very difficult in a tourist trap. Then we thought we should eat lunch. Woe to the person trying to find good food in an off-season tourist trap. Sweatshirts don't expire, so they can remain on the shelf, but hamburger buns...those are a different story.

We walked about four blocks up the main drag, three children in tow, before we realized that our best bet might be to return to the restaurant that was four blocks back, right there where we had started. We hauled ourselves back to the restaurant, The Wagon Wheel or The Whole Hog, something awful like that, and were seated immediately. That was the fastest thing they did for us all afternoon. We had to wait for the menus, wait for the drink orders, wait for the food to arrive. Finally, we stopped someone to say, "At least bring food for the children. Can't you see they're starving?" We finally ate, but then had to rig up an elaborate trap in the aisle to stop a server who might have our check. When one finally stumbled across the rope we had slung between two chairs, our checks spilled out of her apron, and we handed her our credit cards.

Through all of this, the bright sunshine of midday taunted us through the windows. For as long as we were in the restaurant, there was no rain outside.

As we left the restaurant and started to walk back to the chairlift, Allen pointed out a steak house: Texas Red's. "Everybody tried to tell us that was such a great place to eat," he said. "It was not good." Amy shook her head to punctuate Allen's comment. "Not good," she said. "Hard to mess up a steak, but they sure did."

We finally got to the chairlift, paid our ten dollars each, and boarded the deathtrap. My mother's fear of heights began with the onset of menopause. I refuse to believe that I have a similar link, but I was terrified the entire half-hour trip. I trained my eyes upward and urged Emma on with cheery "Hang on"s and "Look at that aspen"s and "Almost there"s. I waved—ever so gingerly—at the passersby who were on their way down, and I yearned to be in their seats. I talked to Emma about what The Fourth of July is about. I tried every stationary thing I knew to keep myself from imagining a fall. When I finally deplaned at the top of the mountain, my jeans were stuck to the backs of my legs with the sweat of pure fear.

Before my back side had fully dried, Allen pointed to the west and said "Storm's comin'!. We don't want to get stuck in that." He was in charge of holding the two-year-old on the rickety chair-wire contraption, so I understood his anxiety. He went right back down. The rest of us started exploring the top of the mountain. We didn't want to have come all this way for nothing. We found a shelter, spotted another

storm coming from the other direction, looked at the view (imagine Chevy Chase at the Grand Canyon in “Vacation”), took a few pictures...

Then we made our way back to the chairlift. We probably spent a grand total of twenty minutes at the top of the mountain. But I have to remember that for a four-year-old, twenty minutes is an eternity. Emma took a few pictures of Jake, so she'll remember this excursion always as something that lasted much, much longer than it really did.

Coming down on the chairlift was much worse. Emma was fine, of course, but I felt like my body was angled down and my choices were to look down and see how far I had to fall, or to look up and see how quickly the storms were approaching...seemingly from both sides. We had donned our sweatshirts at the top of the mountain, and I'm happy to say that we did need them on the way down. (I love to be cold.) That was probably the only thing that went our way all day long. I cannot bear to describe the trip down any more than that, so I'll pick up this story at the base of the mountain.

Before we left RR, we had to visit a playground tucked away at the base of another mountain. (There are lots of mountains here.) It was a great playground: old-school monkey bars and metal slides, great new slides and a sort of climbing wall, and some strange spinning things that worked like perpetual motion machines. We could sit or sprawl out in the little cup and start spinning. Because they sat at an angle, the spinning intensified itself. I guess it's hard to explain...maybe you've seen them somewhere. We all tried them—two-year-old and forty-two-year-old and everyone in between—and we all loved them. We had never seen anything like this before. We didn't have time to really play, though, because the rain was coming.

Remember the two storms? From the top of the last mountain, we had been able to see the two storms bearing down on us. As we came down the mountain, we had been able to hear the thunder, but I didn't tell you about that...

We should have taken this as a hint about what was yet to happen to us this day, but we just laughed and raced to the van. We packed ourselves back in to the aptly-named Odyssey and decided—why not?—to climb this mountain as well. We're safe in our mini-van, and this is not quite a dirt road, so we should be fine, right?

Allen drove. Amy navigated. Sean sat next to Alex in the middle seats, and my big butt was crammed in between two boosters on the back bench—Jake on my left, Emma on my right. “Why do we have to leave the park?” and “I wanted to play some more!” and “I didn't get to throw my toy!” melted away into “My toy flies higher than yours!” and “I got to spin more times than you!” with only me in the middle to referee this verbal onslaught. Lucky for me, the rain grew quite heavy and drew the children's attention. Soon I was explaining what sleet was and why it made those thick little splotches on the windshield, and we all began to imitate the sound that hail would make on the roof of the van if that's what it came to.

It didn't. One other thing went right on this day.

Alex started snoozing, and Sean followed soon thereafter. Jake could no longer count the sleet splotches and succumbed to sleep, and even Emma—who never sleeps—was able to catch a few winks. I began

to imagine how I would help children out of the car if we suddenly found ourselves sideways, perched on a bank of aspen and pine trees. It wouldn't be easy to reach the belt buckles smashing into my hips, but I would be ready. I would be a hero.

We made it to the summit, and started down the other side. There was a flurry of low conversation (I couldn't hear a word of it.) and then we pulled over. Amy produced a map, pushed on the map light, and they had more conversation that we couldn't hear. Jake, now awake because we're no longer moving, asks me, "Emma's mommy, are we lost?"

I reply, "No, Amy's son, don't worry. They're just deciding the best way down the mountain."

They decided. We turned around. We drove back down the mountain and left Red River. The rain followed us, and most of the passengers slept while we drove back to our cozy cabin. Naps continued at the cabin, and we awaited fireworks.

When the time came to seek dinner, we tried to decide: go out or finish off the hot dogs that we have here at the house? Somebody said hot dogs, but somebody else said, "Let's go out," and we went out in search of food.

It was the Fourth of July. Nothing was open. The one place in Angel Fire that WAS open was the one place where we had already eaten. And it wasn't that great, so we headed off toward Eagle Nest. Fireworks were scheduled to go off at the lake there, so we would be ready. "We can find some place to eat in Eagle Nest."

We drove past a restaurant on the main drag, parked the car, and unloaded all of the children. Then we started walking. I think I was the first one to spot it, the name of the restaurant: Texas Red's. "Hard to mess up a steak," Amy had said, "but they sure did." Same restaurant, different branch. I waited to see Allen's face as he read the sign.

"We can keep walking," I assured him. "There's a pizza place up here, maybe a couple of diners." We started walking. "We'll find something."

Three children in tow...you know. We made our way across the street to the pizza place and we were confronted by some kind of tethered monster. She approached us with arms up, almost a gesture of surrender, but something was wrong. "Did you call in an order?" she asked us. We shook our heads. "Then step away from the pizza parlor," she said. (I swear those were her exact words: step away from the pizza parlor.) She stepped closer to us, and we realized that she wore oxygen tubes, stuck up under her nose, and the tubes connecting her to a tank were really long, apparently to allow her to roam freely in the kitchen, fixing pizzas and taking orders. But she was definitely finished today.

She didn't say, "I'm sorry, but we're closed for the evening." She asked us to step away from the pizza parlor. As if we were the menace. As if we were somehow threatening her.

We walked on in search of dinner.

A little way up the hill, we could see there was a diner of some kind. I don't remember the name of it now, but it looked like they would serve food, and that's all we cared about. At this point, it was getting close to fireworks time...maybe 7:30 or something like that...and I kept thinking about the hot dogs we passed up at our vacation house. Plump, juicy, and available.

The diner didn't have an open table...and the tables that were filled seemed to be filled with non-family types. No children. We didn't care. We looked for a table out on the patio. Nothing. And smokers out there. There was a table on the front patio, so we asked if they would serve us there. "We can't get food to that table."

I was starting to sense a conspiracy of some kind. Maybe there's a password we must utter before we can be served on Independence Day. "We can't get food to that table" is just not a believable reason. There had to be something else going on here. Maybe we have some invisible tattoo that only wait staff can see, a big X on the forehead, maybe, or the word TOURIST in big green letters. Whatever the real reason, the result was the same: we were not eating. On our way back down the hill to Texas Red's (the second time today that we made our way back to an eating establishment that we had already passed) we looked longingly at a convenience store and wondered if they had bags of chips and lunchmeat...but we kept walking toward the possibility of a hot meal.

Finally inside Texas Red's, we found out that the wait was one hour and a half. We all burst into sardonic laughter. The children were frightened, but we decided to wait. We had explored other options, and this seemed to be the only viable one. I asked a girl to move over to let me play a video game...only to realize soon after I put in my quarter that she had been waiting there so she could play the same game. I had to ditch my high-score-winning run at the Ms PacMan championship because of guilt.

Soon after I gave up the dots chase, we thought about what we were in for: even after we were finally seated, it still would take a really long time to be served and to eat and to pay and to leave...we would miss the fireworks. So we hauled the kids back out to the van, and I crammed my huge behind back in between the two booster seats, and we went in search of a place to park and watch the fireworks. We listened to the grumbling of our children's stomachs and we batted Sally Struthers away, as she tried to peek in on us. Then we saw it: a hamburger stand. We could order hamburgers at a little window and eat them outside. No waiting for a server, no waiting for the check...just pay and eat. Angels sang in the heavens. We all unloaded again.

Allen and Amy approached the window just as they were closing up. Not serving anymore tonight.

I swear it to be true.

Finally, we found a food stand that looked like something off the midway at the fair, complete with fried candy bars and huge turkey legs and roasted corn. The men stayed in the van with the children while Amy and I stood in line. We waited. The line was long. We watched as the sky grew a little darker. We waited. A man came out of the tent and put up lights. "This is a good sign," Amy said. "If they're lighting the sign, they don't plan to close soon."

We relax a little, but we're still standing in line. The sky grows darker and we move up a little. Someone gives up and leaves the line, saying, "I'm going to have an egg salad sandwich in the RV." I consider following him to get some of that egg salad, but Amy and I stay and wait. I see Sean approaching, holding Emma and Jake by the hand. "Bathroom," he says to me, and I nod. At nearly every meal time, Emma decides she must relieve herself. I wonder if he'll be able to find anyplace for them to do their business, but I can't think about that. I have to practice saying my food order. I have to decide now what food I will buy to feed my hungry family...enough to satisfy the hunger and not so much that I can't carry it myself. Plus, I want to be able to spit the words out quickly, in case they're thinking about closing.

The sky has grown quite dark, and we have seen a few stray sparkles in the sky. Not part of the "real" show, of course, but every time I hear that sound, that little explosion, I worry a little. I want to eat and watch the fireworks, not necessarily at the same time, but I certainly don't want to have my back to the show, ordering food for my family, while the fireworks are going off.

Remember we had two goals for this day, and seeing fireworks was one of them.

Finally, we are next in line...and the fireworks begin in earnest...and we eat our smoked meat sandwiches and drink our lemonade (which smells a little fishy, by the way) in near-total darkness. I can't see if I'm spilling barbecue sauce on my shirt, but at this point it doesn't matter much. We're eating. We're watching fireworks.

It was a lousy day. Can I call it a terrible, horrible, no good, very bad day?

I think I can.

I'll be amazed if the Richardsons ever want to go on vacation with us again. As it turns out, this wasn't even the worst of everything...turns out Emma was sick, and I think she passed it on to little Alex, and our trip home was punctuated by our stops to clean out our cars. Alex threw up in Taos, and Emma threw up somewhere in the eastern NM frontier.

So when people ask me, "How was your vacation?" I smile and say, "Fine, how was yours?" And I hope that's enough to change the subject, because I plan to never speak of it again.