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*Santa Fe (6/26/97)*

One year in the early Eighties I rounded up the Usual Suspects and got them all to agree to go to the Grand Canyon for Christmas; it's deserted then, I said, it's absolutely beautiful in snow, we'll drink yards of cognac and stagger out in the night and see if we can fall off the cliff, it'll be great, it'll be memorable, we all should do it. So everyone agreed and then erosion set in: first one, then another begged off, then we rolled it back to Thanksgiving, then more people found excuses not to go... . Finally our truck broke down in the Safeway parking lot on the way out of town and my girlfriend and I and our friend Hilary piled into Hilary's Volkswagen and left; and let me say that about five minutes after I got into the car I swore I was never going to do anything like that again, and I've fairly well kept the promise. But on this occasion there were sixteen hours of Hilary singing along with her Joni Mitchell tapes (never again) with my knees bouncing off my chin (never again) in the backseat of the Beetle (never again) before we did finally get there and walked down to the river and camped out in a continuous drizzle for three or four nights until we got tired of it and walked back out. Then we had to get back, of course. Hilary had a couple of friends in medical school doing residencies in Santa Fe, which provided us with a much-needed excuse to stop and get out of the car on the way home; so we did, on Thanksgiving day itself, as it happened. We called around from a gas station and got directions to a place north of town towards Los Alamos, one of those huge elegant Spanish single story adobe houses with big raw wooden beams in the ceiling and a central atrium that served, on this occasion, as a dining room large enough to accommodate the host (a wealthy doctor) and thirty or forty guests, most of them unknown to him and to each other. So we lurched in out of the night, sat down among a large number of mutual strangers, and pigged out; feeling, I must say, pretty much at home. — As it happened I'd

read a piece in the *New Yorker* a week or two before this about Santa Fe, and the author, a fairly acute observer, had mentioned that the natives (meaning as always in the West anyone who'd been there long enough to have a mailing address) tended to sort themselves in a pecking order based on the length of their familiarity with the region — not really based on how long they'd lived in Santa Fe, mind you, since too few had, but rather on when they'd first set eyes on the place: in the old days, you know, when it was yet unspoiled. Accordingly, the author continued, all conversations between two persons introducing themselves to one another in Santa Fe tended to begin with a variation on "When I first got here (in 1955) ... ." — So I was sitting at the table by myself, munching on a turkey leg, and two guys who were obviously strangers to one another sat down opposite me and struck up a conversation. And sure enough the first guy began with "When I first came here (in 1973) ...," allowing the second guy to trump him with "When I first got here (in 1967) ..." but leaving both of them, presumably, with a sense of shared superiority over the mob of tourists around us, many of whom, admittedly, hadn't set foot in the Southwest before the parade at Macy's that morning. — And I don't know but what these two seasoned desert rats might not have found common cause on many other fronts, had I not interrupted with a loud burst of laughter and told them, without the slightest thought for consequence, that their conversation had been struck from a standard template. They both stared at me blankly as I explained this. Then got up in stony silence, and, neither looking at the other, walked away in opposite directions. — For all I know, they're still walking.