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Dear Richard & Rene

So is it tomato or tamayo, colour or color, aluminium or aluminum? Are chips what you have with fish or what you have with a dip? Are biscuits really scones and why can't a car boot be just that instead of a trunk? From a purely South African perspective how do the US Postal Service get to deliver mail anywhere in the country overnight – all the time!! And how can you have history when it only starts in 1492? America is different – of course the Americans would have you think that it is the rest of the world that is different – but even that is only on the rare occasions that they admit there is another part of the world.

We are now close to our first full year in Houston – it's been really exciting, a learning experience for all of us and overall a totally positive change in our lifestyle. Adjusting to any new environment is challenging and this was no exception. However, Cheryl and I have been through it quite a few times before and each time it has turned out to be the best move we could have made. This time we had to anticipate the difficulty of Ryan and Lauren taking on our adventurous spirit and being able to look on the past as full of irreplaceable memories but something never to be regretted. From the way they have both adapted I guess we shouldn't expect them to put down roots anywhere for too long. They have done really well at school and are bringing in exceptional marks considering they have a completely new style of learning and the language to deal with.

Ryan has just turned 16 and so gets to take on the Texan drivers on the road. A small complication is that he needs a car to do that and somehow that problem got to be mine so I am looking at various options to get him a set of wheels that will be as safe as you can make a 16-year old. He is still in touch with some of his South African friends from time to time primarily through the Internet, on which he spends most of his waking hours (and I suspect many of his sleeping ones as well). He's hoping to take Computer Science when he goes to college and US is a great place to do that. He wants to go to MIT but I am not sure that will be in range so he may have to settle for a Texas college. He still has a very sharp sense of humour and regularly manages to exercise his mother's gullibility. Ryan has recently written the PSAT test (preliminary test for SATs) here which is the test he will eventually take when he graduates from high school. In true democratic fashion he is allowed to have a few practice runs at it before he takes the actual test in 2000. He got a score of around 1180 which is very good considering how new he is to it. A really good score would be 1300 and above so he is within reach. The better he does the more likely he is to have a choice of colleges and scholarships. Lauren was given the opportunity to also write the SAT test as a Duke University talent search because of her exceptional marks in 7th Grade, but we haven't yet had the results of that.

Lauren has excelled at school as much as Ryan has. She was student of the month in October and has continued to produce outstanding marks. She will benefit from having a longer time to adjust before the final years of high school. She has been taking horse-riding lessons and true to form is being acknowledged as something of a natural. This reminds us of the music lessons where she did the same. She has suddenly shot up this year and is now close to being as tall as

Cheryl and I, so clothing is becoming a regular and significant expense. Lolly has also become a mascot for the school sports team and dresses up as a green Mustang (horse that is, not car) and leaps energetically around the field during games. Since there is an element of acting and a fair degree of attention-getting the role could have been designed for her. Her best friend from South Africa also moved to Houston so they have spent several weekends together.

Cheryl probably had the toughest time of all settling in. The first few months were really difficult as we were in the apartment and everything was very new to us. Then when we finally got in to the house she had just started making a few contacts when summer came along and everything closed down. So she felt that void badly. Since the school started up again she has been doing volunteer work at both schools and has also become involved with a few ladies groups in the area. She has made a few friends and found lots of new acquaintances. I met several of them during recent Christmas parties and they are all great folk. She is particularly friendly with a Canadian lady and with a Dutch couple and we see them quite often. Cheryl is not allowed to work yet as we are waiting for her work authorization to come through. We should have it in January but it now seems that she won't have any free time left to use it!!

I have had a really busy year. I have just done my 110th flight for the year. Adjusting to the sales environment here was easier than I expected as the market is significantly bigger than the SA one. I was given the task of developing sufficient work in the Atlanta area for us to be able to open a branch there and have achieved more than the targets set for the year by about 30%. As a result we will open a branch in early 1999 and the plan is for me to move on to Florida and do the same there. However, one of the deals I signed was with Coca-Cola and they want me to stay on as Account Manager. The company is busy restructuring the sales and marketing division right now so I am not sure yet what my role will be. But since I am earning in US dollars and am commission based I am not too fussed what they do with me. I travel most weeks and have built up enough miles and hotel room nights for us to take a Christmas vacation to New York and Atlanta for 9 days at almost no cost so the family do get some pay-back. Next year we hope to get to the Lions International Convention in San Diego, and as it is during summer we will go as a family. I keep in touch with the South African scene by reading Internet versions of the newspapers, and judging by the drop in the economy and value of houses and the Rand we got out just in time. I still have retirement funds there but expect that they will continue to depreciate in value along the lines of Zimbabwe so am trying to rebuild a dollar-based fund here.

The house we have is very comfortable and we are putting in a swimming pool in January (compliments of the Coca-Cola commission) and that will make it complete. We have slowly been buying furniture during the year and now have most of what we need. The location is superb as it is against a vacant greentrail lot so we don't have neighbours on that side. Because it is at the end of a road we also have a yard that is 50% bigger than the average which is why we had plenty of room for the pool. It is a double-storey house with the main bedroom downstairs and the kids' rooms upstairs along with a huge games room. The suburb we are in is a pine forest and there are 80-odd miles of green trail rides that we can take either on our bikes (wouldn't my doctor be happy to hear that!) or with the dogs. Lake Houston is a mile or two away and is an easy ride or walk. There is a picnic area there where various neighbourhood events are held during the year.

So I guess as we reflect on the past year it is again the best move we could have made and any trepidation was quickly dispelled. We do, of course, miss friends enormously but that has always been the case since we made our first move from Zambia in 1973. Many of those Zambian friends are still regular correspondents every year and we hope that the same will happen with our South African friends. We are not likely to make any earth-shattering changes next year, but as Cheryl often says, the next time that happens will be the first. We have already started receiving great newsy letters from various parts of the world and really enjoy these annual updates.

Looking forward to hearing from you soon.

*Love
Tony + Cheryl*