

Email: lanpeter@netzero.net

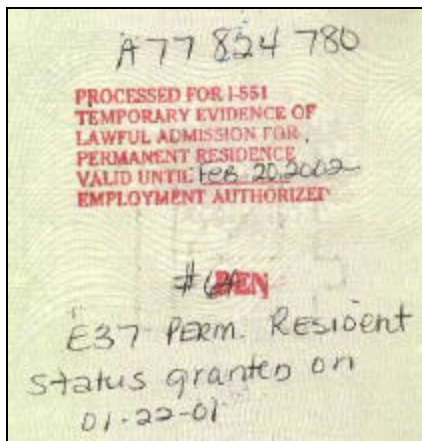
7 March 2001

Dear everyone,

This was going to be a Christmas letter but I delayed it until we knew if we were staying in America or not. The delay turned out to be longer than I expected.

2½ years for this?!

To cut a long story short, Lan's application for permanent resident status has been approved and look what she got:



A new stamp in Lan's passport.

Here is the unabridged version: You will recall that I came home to Australia in 1998 when my father got sick and that the original idea was that Lan would follow a few months later. However, Lan's employer, *US West*, offered to apply on her behalf to get her permanent resident status, commonly known here as getting a *green card*—even though the actual card hasn't been green for decades! This made us change our plans so after dad died, I quit my job, finished the work on our house and rejoined Lan in the US. Permanent resident status is one step down from citizenship, so the American government will continue to call us *aliens*.

Lan was led to believe that the process to get a green card would take about a year. I wasn't there during any of the early conversations but I soon learnt that the lawyer would almost always communicate by telephone, possibly

because it was quicker but it also avoided putting anything in writing that could be held against him. Thinking that Lan would have her green card and I would be allowed to work by about September 1999, I entered a "community college" to get a computing certificate. About halfway through the year, we asked more questions of the lawyer and found that it would take longer but I would be allowed to work, perhaps by the end of 1999. However, Lan would be stuck at US West, which she now hated, for some time longer though he couldn't say how long that might be.

Lan did her best to put on a smile at US West but it was difficult as the organization is intensely political. Many factors guide the decision-making process but logic and efficiency don't appear to be among them. Lan started getting attacks of vertigo (dizziness) around March 2000 and they continued for several months. We believe it was mainly stress-related.

Hope came last July when we had our fingerprints taken. A decision is normally made within 2 or 3 months, so we expected everything to be concluded by say October, well in time for a Christmas letter. It wasn't.

Everything was thrown into turmoil when another company bought US West and Lan was amongst thousands who lost their job in September. Getting laid-off is sufficiently traumatic for most people but it seemed our green card application would be withdrawn immediately and we would have to leave the country, just as it was about to be approved.

However, we did find out that losing a job didn't affect the application. Once a person has "work authorization", they can in theory work for anyone but the employee promises to work for the employer when the green card is approved. What was important then was Lan's status at the time her case was approved. Lan tried desperately to get rehired but to no avail.

We were getting ready to pack our bags when help arrived. We were unaware that changes to immigration

law were making their way through Congress and few expected it to pass on the first attempt so there was little publicity. It did pass and Bill Clinton signed it into law in October. One provision allowed green card applicants to change jobs if they had an application pending for over 6 months. Ours had been in for 12, so our application was saved! Or so we thought. It wasn't clear if the new rules would apply to (a) people like us who were already in the system, or (b) only to those who filed a new application after the new law was enacted, or (c) only to those who filed a new application after some arbitrary date when the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) was ready, say January 1, 2001. This question has *still* not been resolved as the INS has still not issued their "regulations" that will specify exactly how they intend to implement the new law. We had thought of coming home to visit last Christmas but I didn't want to book a flight until we knew whether we needed a one-way or return ticket.

Lan worked part-time at my company for a month or two while she looked for a "real" job and in December got a job as a technical trouble-shooter at [Avaya](#), a company that makes telephone voice-messaging systems. Unfortunately, she isn't using the skills she has and is being asked to do things she hasn't done before, making us wonder why they hired her and prompting one of her friends to suggest that she there as a trouble-maker! It is also a long drive from home and that doesn't help.

The INS runs an automated telephone system so you can check the status of your case. We discovered that Lan's case was approved on January 22nd. After we received the approval notice, Lan got out to the local INS office at 6.30am to be ready for when they opened at 7.30 but even then was about 100th in the queue! She was frozen by the time she got into the building at 8.10 but by the time she got out at 9.30, she was officially a permanent resident.

However, my case was *not* approved. As the spouse of an applicant, the

requirements placed on me are minimal, principally that I haven't shot anyone recently and that I don't carry the ebola virus. (Having both would definitely disqualify me.) Eventually we found out that the problem is our marriage certificate: we don't have one—at least not one the INS will accept. Since there are so many fraudulent marriages, the INS insists on one issued by a government. The church issued ours, even though it has "Commonwealth of Australia" at the top. We have ordered a real one and it should be here soon.

Going back a bit, I was allowed to work in January 2000 and I started work at [Premier Data Systems](#). I've spent the year mainly doing an intranet application, which means it uses internet technology, but it runs only within the company. However, the more I learn, the more I realize I don't know which is depressing.

I've started doing the prerequisites to the prerequisites so I can get a master's degree in computer science at Colorado University but it will be years before I finish. By the time I'm 40, I should be able to compete with 22-year-olds finishing their degree. Still, while employers value a degree, it will be largely useless garbage, just like my engineering degree, so there is a huge amount of current technology I need to learn and certifications I need to gain. I still need to do one more class at the community college to finish my "Associate Degree" too.

Out and about

We only did two short trips together last year though both were fascinating.

The Windy City¹

The first was to Chicago in early May. Lan has a cousin living there who she had not seen since 1968 so they had quite a bit of catching up to do. Xuan puts people to sleep at the hospital and wakes them up later. She is forced to work odd hours since patients fail to

set appointments before contracting diseases, getting into car crashes, falling down stairs and so on. Very inconsiderate. She did however have time to take us to the Botanical Gardens and even as a non-garden person, I have to say it was most impressive.



Lan and Xuan in the gardens. [Larger](#).



The 110-storey Sears Tower

We also did a walking tour of modern skyscrapers (we were too late for the early skyscraper tour which probably would have been even more interesting), and then went up the top of the [Sears Tower](#)² which was the world's tallest building for over 20 years. My favorite building though was the [Inland Steel Building](#)³. The external metalwork is stainless steel that looks like it was installed

yesterday but actually dates from 1958.

On our last day in the city, we visited an atom-smashing center (the [Fermi National Accelerator Laboratory](#)⁴) and "[Robie house](#)"⁵ designed by Frank Lloyd-Wright. The last was disappointing because the guide was a motor-mouth and wasted so much time outside, that at the time the tour was supposed to finish, the group had just entered the house but we had to leave to catch the plane home.

Dinosaur National Monument

Memorial Day is the equivalent of Australia's Anzac Day commemorating the sacrifices of servicemen and women. Taking advantage of the long weekend, we decided to visit some friends in Grand Junction, a town on the western edge of Colorado and used that as a staging point to see Dinosaur National Monument. National Monuments are effectively National Parks but not quite so famous. Actually, it is two parks in one. Some of the best and biggest dinosaur skeletons have been dug up in the section of the park that is over the state border in Utah. Since we had limited time and most of the dinosaurs are now in places like Pittsburgh, we visited the magnificent gorges carved by the Green and Yampa rivers.



At the Dinosaur National Monument. [Larger](#).



¹ Contrary to popular belief, the name comes not from the weather but from the amount of "hot air" generated by early Chicago politicians claiming their city to be better than New York.

² <http://www.sears-tower.com/>

³ <http://www.galinsky.com/buildings/inlandsteel/index.htm>

⁴ <http://www.fnal.gov/>

⁵ <http://architecture.about.com/arts/architecture/library/blflwrobbe.htm>

You'll need to go the web site to really see the incredible view. [Much larger](#).

Amazingly, a group of Spaniards came through here in 1776 from Santa Fe, New Mexico, hoping to find a way through to California. A long walk.

Incidentally, it seems non-American exploration is quite under-appreciated. I think every American can proudly tell you of [Lewis and Clark's](#)⁶ expedition across America reaching the Pacific in 1805. It truly was a remarkable achievement but they were not the first. [Alexander Mackenzie](#)⁷ and a group of Canadians got there first, arriving a little way north of what is now Vancouver in 1793 but they have been largely forgotten.

Our next trip ... home!

We have booked a trip to Sydney and Adelaide. I'll be in Australia April 15 to 29th but since Lan hasn't had time to accumulate much holiday time (and American's get only 2 weeks each year), she won't arrive until April 21st. We intend to see as many people as possible during that time, especially the few hundred that make up Lan's immediate family.

In our letter last year, I commented on the wonderful time we had with Lan's aunt [Tuyet](#) in Orlando, Florida. We suffered a great loss this year when she died unexpectedly of leukemia. She went to the doctor thinking she had the flu and died a few weeks later. She was only 47.

Bumper stickers

Is this where you started reading? Go on, admit it. For your entertainment, all the [bumper stickers](#)⁸ we have seen while in the US are now conveniently located on our web site. Incidentally, the [main entry to our site](#)⁹ has moved. If you haven't taken a look since this

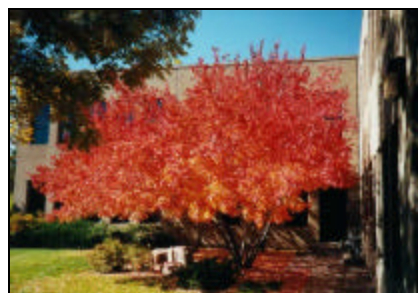
time last year, it has been expanded considerably since then. Anyway, here they are:

- *BUCKLE UP: it makes it harder for the aliens to suck you out of the car*
- *Fat people are harder to kidnap*
- *Eve was framed*
- *You'd be like this too if a house fell on your sister*
- *I still miss my ex.—
but my aim is improving!*
(My new personal favorite. This and the two above were on the same car.)
- *Conflict is inevitable, violence is not.*
- *Beer. Helping ugly people have sex since 1862.*
- *The more I learn about women,
the more I love my truck.*
- *If you destroy a work of art, you are called a vandal; if you destroy a work of nature you are called a developer.*
- *Blondes are NOT dumb!*
(applied to the bumper upside-down)
- *Doing my part to PISS OFF THE RELIGIOUS RIGHT*
- *Driving drunk? Take off your seatbelt.*
- *Stop global whining.*

In other news

While the US presidential election received coverage in exhausting detail, an interesting thing that was barely noticed was that voters in Alabama (population 4 million) were asked whether a clause in the state constitution banning inter-racial marriages should be removed. Half a million said NO! Remember that of the population, perhaps 80% are of voting age but only about half actually vote.

The tree outside my office building was spectacular this last autumn. In fact, it was a good year for "fall colors" all over Denver.



Fall colors at my office. [Larger](#).

I did a course on public speaking this year and for one of my talks, chose to look into the Palestinian issue. I was shocked by what I found and I've become quite passionate on the issue. As I said in the talk, whether you call someone a *terrorist* or a *freedom-fighter* depends on which side you think justice is on. I don't think anyone argues it was wrong for the Resistance to strike back at the Nazis occupying Europe, yet that is situation the Palestinians find themselves in except that the media generally portrays them as terrorists trying to take what rightfully belongs to the Israelis. I've put the text for all four speeches on our site but if nothing else, look at the 3 maps of [Palestine](#)¹⁰ to get a glimpse how the truth has been distorted in the media. My speech about [bumper stickers](#)¹¹ is there too!

The *Denver Post* reports that soda machines kill more Americans than sharks.¹²

Before the Olympics I was pleased to be out of Sydney to avoid the general chaos that I thought it would bring. When it became clear that we were doing an exceptionally good job and the mood was electric, I wished I had been home. Unfortunately the Games were largely ignored here. There was no conversation about it at the office and NBC's coverage was widely criticized, mainly because nothing was broadcast live. I was of course very interested in Kieren Perkins 1500m race and was hoping to find a live

⁶ <http://www.lewisclark.net/index.html>

⁷ <http://www.johnamatt.com/amrmap.htm> and also http://www.lib.virginia.edu/exhibits/lewis_clark/ch4-27.html

⁸ <http://www.homestead.com/peterlan/Humor5.html>

⁹ <http://www.geocities.com/lanandpeter>

¹⁰ <http://www.homestead.com/peterlan/Palestine.html>

¹¹ <http://www.homestead.com/peterlan/BumperStickers.html>

¹² If you try to get the money out by leaning them over, they may fall and squash you!

broadcast on the internet. The best I could do was the *Sydney Morning Herald's* live *text* commentary. While it wouldn't work for a short race, it was better than nothing for a race that lasted 15 minutes. When it was over I went into the living room to tell Lan that Kieren had come second to another Australian and at that moment the NBC commentator said "*and tomorrow night, we'll be bringing you coverage of the final in the men's 1500m freestyle*"—just 24 hours late. Still, we got to see Cathy's glorious moment lighting the torch and the "air guitar" humiliation of the US men's swimming relay team. Too many of the Americans came across to me as arrogant, spoilt brats while most of the Aussies were very down to earth. Not that I'm biased of course!

The "win at all costs" mentality, so evident in American sport, claimed an unlikely victim last year. One *parent* killed another at their children's hockey game after an argument broke out about their sons' on-field behavior.

Lan and I saw *The Castle* on video recently and got a huge amount of pleasure out of it. For those of you who have not seen it, it's an Australian film—a very Australian film—about a family whose house is about to be acquired to allow an expansion of the airport. The language is coarse to be sure but I felt it somehow captured the multi-cultural, unpretentious, everyone gets a "fair go" spirit of the country.

In the past century, life expectancy for Americans increased 30 years. Of this total, 25 were due to public health initiatives—food and workplace safety regulations, immunization, pollution abatement etc. and just 5 were due to modern medicine like heart-bypass surgery. -NPR 3Apr00

For the 19th consecutive year, the best-selling vehicle in America was Ford's full-size pickup truck with sales of 876,716 and EPA fuel consumption range 14-21 mpg¹³. Next best was the equivalent GM product, then the Ford Explorer 4WD/SUV. In fourth place

was the best selling *car*, the Toyota Camry with 422,961, or less than half the best but mileage of 20-33, or 50% better. It is my impression that most of the pickups perform the same job as the cars—going to work, getting groceries and picking up the kids from school. Such a waste. To make up, the new President is promising oil drilling in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge.

And finally

We will endeavor to write to each of you individually over the next week or so. Those without email will have to wait a little longer while we get make copies of this letter using carbon-based toner on flattened dead trees.

¹³ Lower figure for city driving/thirstiest model; higher figure for highway driving/best model.