

The Canyon

The night air was crystal clear as Frank stepped out of the hotel – exactly what he had been hoping for. There was no moon and the stars stood out brilliantly against the black sky. With his telescope and camera tucked under his arm he was hoping to get a good picture of the Orion Nebula. Laura had “discovered” this nebula during a family vacation to the Grand Canyon many years ago and it somehow seemed appropriate that he should come back to the canyon to photograph it. He knew that astronomers had studied this nebula for hundreds of years before that trip, but it was new to he and Laura and that made it special.

He zipped his windbreaker all the way up. He’d decided to make this trip in the spring because he thought the air would be clearer and the crowds would be smaller. The air was clear but there were more people than he’d expected. Not as many as there were during the summer, but he’d forgotten that it would be spring break for some schools. He’d been lucky to find a room in one of the hotels on the rim of the canyon. That made it easy to walk to a clear area at night. He’d scouted out a good spot for star gazing just west of the hotel during the day but he was dismayed to see a cluster of flashlights in that direction. He decided to follow the trail east instead. He had a red lens over his flashlight to protect his night vision. The trail was paved, so it was easy to follow even in the dim red beam of his flashlight.

It took him about twenty minutes to get clear of the lights from the hotel area. He was surprised to discover that other people were on the trail, even this late at night. Their bright white flashlights annoyed him, but he squinted as they passed so he could still see clearly. He found a spot with a good view of Orion and started to set up his telescope. Suddenly a bicyclist with a blinding headlight rounded a corner and almost crashed into him. The cyclist swore at him as he swerved around the telescope. The gall of the rider infuriated Frank. The trails were clearly marked “No Bicycles,” but this idiot was tearing down the path at night. And he seemed to think that Frank was the one doing something stupid! There appeared to be a clearing to the right of the path, away from the canyon, so Frank picked up his telescope and carried it in that direction.

He had to hike farther than he’d expected until he found a flat open area where he could set up the telescope, but he was rewarded with an excellent view of Orion. All the care he’d taken to preserve his night vision was almost undone when he looked at his cell phone. He needed to use the compass app to orient the clockwork drive on his telescope, but he didn’t realize the screen was so bright. It took him longer than usual to set everything up because his fingers were getting stiff with the cold, but in the end he had some excellent pictures. He packed up the telescope and began to walk back to the trail.

As he walked, his mind drifted back to the times he had spent star gazing with Laura. In truth, Frank had never been nearly as interested in star gazing as she had been. He used to kid her about that fact that he could download much better pictures of stars from the Internet than she could take with her telescope, but she pointed out that the same could be said of the antique cars and other subjects which he liked to photograph. When

all was said and done, it was the people in the pictures that made photographs special. Laura beside her telescope, Frank beside a Stanley Steamer, the kids clustered around Goofy at Disney World . . . The backgrounds of these pictures would be there forever. The people were only there for one fleeting moment in time. Now the kids were scattered to the winds with families of their own, and Laura had been gone for almost three years now.

Frank still felt her loss acutely. He had always assumed that she would be there forever. When he retired he thought they'd have all the time in the world to take the trips they'd dreamed about while he was working. The thought that she might die first never even crossed his mind. Now he had the time and the money they'd always dreamed of, but no one to share them.

It suddenly dawned on Frank that he had been walking for a long time. Much longer than he remembered walking away from the trail. Surely he should have come across it by now. It was a paved trail and should be easy to spot, even in the dim red beam of his flashlight. He'd followed a little path through the woods to the clearing where he'd taken the pictures, and he was sure he was still on that path now. He'd hiked west from the hotel and then turned away from the canyon . . . NO! He'd intended to hike west, but he'd hiked east instead! When he picked up the telescope to walk back he had turned the wrong way. He cursed himself for being a forgetful old man and turned around.

He was shivering with the cold now, and he felt it soaking into his body. His shoulders ached from being hunched against the cold, and the tip of his nose was stinging. He shifted the telescope to his other hand and tried to warm his numb fingers in his jacket pocket. He was pretty sure he was returning along the same path he'd walked earlier, but it twisted and turned and there were several forks he didn't remember. It wasn't until the trail petered out in some thick bushes that he realized he'd taken a wrong turn. He tried to backtrack, but once again the trail petered out. The trees blocked his view of the stars, his feet were getting numb, and it slowly dawned on him that he was completely disoriented.

"Don't tell me I'm going to have to call 911 and ask them to rescue me!" he thought. Then he remembered his cell phone had a navigation program. Even though he wasn't on a road, the phone would point the way back to the hotel! He wondered why he hadn't thought of this before. His mind seemed to be working slowly as he fumbled through his pockets looking for his phone. With a growing sense of horror, he realized the phone wasn't there. He must have left it on the ground when he set up the telescope.

He started jumping up and down, trying to warm up. Then he started blindly jogging through the woods, first one way and then the other, trying to find a clearing. He stumbled through the underbrush, turning whichever way seemed to be more open. Finally the forest thinned out enough that he could catch a glimpse of the sky every now and then. Not enough to get his bearings, but enough to give him hope. He was shivering uncontrollably now, and panting so hard his glasses were fogging up, but he picked up the pace as he headed toward what looked like a clearing.

He banged into a tree and dropped the telescope. The camera, the clockwork drive, and the mini tripod all flew off in different directions. He tried to pick up the pieces but his hands were shaking so badly he kept dropping them. He managed to pick up the flashlight and tried to take off the red lens. "The hell with the night vision!" he thought. "I need more light!" But the lens was screwed on too tightly for his numbed fingers to loosen it. Fighting off panic, he realized he was in serious trouble. Abandoning the telescope he crashed through the woods, peering at the treetops trying to find a clearing.

Finally he stumbled into a clearing. It wasn't very big, but he could see just enough of the sky to recognize a few constellations. He turned to his left and. . . Polaris! The North Star! When he left the hiking path he'd turned south, so if he headed north he'd get back to the trail that led to the hotel! Frantically he fought his way through the woods. He fought off the temptation to follow what looked like easier paths to the left or right and bulled his way through the brush trying to head straight north. It looked like there was a clearing just ahead.

He tripped over a rock and fell flat on his face. His left arm got caught in a small pine tree and he spun to the right. His right arm reached out into nothingness. He realized with horror that he was staring into the canyon itself. He watched his flashlight fall for what seemed like an eternity until it disappeared from sight. He felt totally disoriented and the world seemed to swirl around him. He shut his eyes and tried to fight back the panic. Shaking violently with fear and cold he inched his way back from the edge. He felt a tree behind him and with utmost care he edged his way around the tree until it was between him and the canyon. He pulled himself up into a sitting position and leaned against the tree, trembling.

He sat there for a long time. Eventually the trembling subsided and was replaced by an overwhelming weariness. He was totally lost, his flashlight was gone, he'd almost fallen into the canyon, and now all he wanted to do was sleep. He realized he was succumbing to exposure, but he realized it in a strange, detached way. Almost as though he was an observer, looking down on his body. "Is this what it feels like to die?" he thought. He remembered reading a book by Eddie Rickenbacker, years ago. Rickenbacker had been horribly injured in a plane crash, and he wrote about how easy it was to give in to death. "Dying was easy" he'd written. "Deciding to live was hard." Of course, Rickenbacker had been a lot younger at the time. Here he was in his seventies, freezing to death in a forest. "Twenty years ago, I could have made it" he thought. He wondered how long it would be until somebody found his body. Nobody knew he was out star gazing. Of course, tomorrow lots of people would be hiking around the canyon. They'd find him, but it would be too late. Would it make the news? Probably not. Lots of people died here. They sold books about it in the gift shop. Books about people who died in the Grand Canyon. He wondered if they'd write about him. A foolish old man who died of exposure within a mile of the hotel. . .

"No!" He shouted the word out loud, and the sound of his voice startled him. For some reason, the thought of being in that book infuriated him. He was not going to just

give up and die out here in the woods. The path ran along the edge of the canyon. It couldn't be far from here. He must have crossed it when he was blindly stumbling through the woods. He leaned forward and began crawling away from the canyon, feeling the ground with his hands. Just when he was beginning to lose hope, he felt the smooth pavement of the path. He struggled to his feet and began trudging toward the hotel. He might be a foolish old man, but he was a foolish old man who would live to see another day.