

Scattered Memories

Wayne Rapp

It was late afternoon in Tusayan, Arizona, one of those glorious days in late November when the sun was still warm with no hint of the coming winter. Jane knew that if she was home in Ohio the day would likely be blustery with soggy leaves clogging the gutters and a chill that she could not escape any time she left the warmth of her house. But here, just a few miles from the South Rim of the Grand Canyon, the weather was still magical. This was a favorite time of hers to travel. With families at home with their children attending to the learning process, it was so much easier to move around.

Jane sat at the end of the bar by herself sipping a glass of Pinot Grigio. She thought of Phil and the many trips they made together in their almost forty years of marriage. Of course, they'd taken the three children when they were growing up, sometimes arguing with teachers and principals who did not want the children out of school. The time when the family had gone to Mexico was particularly galling. Here were the three children in a foreign country, charting the weather, trying to learn a bit of the language, absorbing themselves in the culture, and she had to defend the experience to middle school and primary school principals who wanted all students in their seats. She smiled at the memory of that time she'd handed to both principals the reports she and her husband had assigned the children while they were away, and in her newly-learned and practiced Spanish, explained that these assignments should go a long way in making up for the time they'd lost. If they hadn't understood what she was saying, they'd just have to check a translation dictionary.

And then—all too soon it seemed—the children were gone, and she and Phil enjoyed a travel life of their own. Arizona was one of their favorite places to visit, and during the many trips they'd taken west, they'd found time to return to the Grand Canyon. Its majesty overwhelmed them, and each time they visited they would remark at the feeling of awe that must have come over the Spaniards who'd first discovered this breathtaking vista.

They had been here a year ago, returning to Ohio just a week before Phil's fatal heart attack. They had a Grand Canyon routine that they always carried out: sunset one evening

followed by sunrise the next day. If they only had a day to spend, the bookend experience of the glorious sun's movement in the canyon was necessary to their enjoyment. This time, though, she was here alone for sunset.

Jane sipped her wine and tried to think of Phil, but the woman with the two men at the other end of the bar was becoming a major distraction. Jane hoped the woman was drunk; she'd hate to think that her cackling laughter was a normal part of her every day social behavior. It was beginning to drive her batty. The woman slapped one of the men on the back, threw her head back and let go another assault on the eardrums. Jane wondered about the relationship of the trio. If she were in a downtown bar in Columbus, Jane might think she was a coworker on a business trip or even a local looking to be picked up. But in Tusayan, the small Native American community that guarded the front gate of the South Rim of the Canyon, she couldn't imagine a woman like this on her own. Clearly she was with one of the men. Jane tried to imagine her husband's reaction to this woman. Phil traveled often in his job, and Jane knew he spent many nights in hotels. Did he migrate to hotel bars out of loneliness? She couldn't imagine a woman like this one would appeal to him in any way, yet she knew from his own confession that at least one woman had drawn him in on the road.

Jane sat in jeans and an Ohio State sweatshirt. She'd let her short hair go gray, but, even at sixty-three, she was one of those lucky ones who did not look old. She would have looked rather distinguished, except her face was too pale, especially for this part of the country, and she did nothing to add artificial color. She'd spent too much time in hibernation this past summer and fall, not tending to their garden, realizing that it had been more Phil's thing than hers. The only extended time she'd spent outside was when she let herself be talked into joining her children and grandchildren on an annual trek to Fort Walton Beach, Florida, over Easter. She had expected that her sedentary lifestyle would add pounds to her slight frame, but her lack of appetite had compensated for her lack of exercise.

Jane looked at her watch. She had plenty of time to make the Canyon before sunset, but the woman's cackle was literally driving her out of the bar. She gulped the last of her wine and slipped off the stool, not too gracefully. She was too short for high stools.

She went back to her room and retrieved a light coat. She didn't need it at the moment but knew that in the Canyon it would get cold quickly as soon as the sun went down. She picked up the coat from the floor of the closet. She'd placed it there purposely to hide the square cardboard box beneath it. She lifted the box, fully aware of its heft, held it clumsily in one arm and covered it with her coat. Once at the car, she placed the box on the back floor and casually laid the coat over its top

Jane took great pleasure in handing over her Golden Age Passport card to the ranger at the gate. You had to be sixty-two to be eligible. With the card, entrance to the bearer and all others in the car was free in all national parks. Jane had just turned sixty-two a few weeks before their last trip, and Phil had suggested she get the card to commemorate her birthday.

"I won't be here by myself," he'd said. "You'll always be with me, so put the card in your name."

She thought it a wonderful idea and carried her card with her at all times. The ranger asked for some ID other than the card, and Jane handed over her Ohio driver's license.

"This looks like your older sister, not you," the ranger said, handing it back to Jane with a smile. "If you're here for the sunset, follow the road toward Mather Point. You'll be heading west. Go past the village and you'll reach Hopi Point. It's a favorite site for the sunset. If it's too crowded, any of the turnoffs between there and Hermits Rest are almost as good."

Jane thanked him and drove into the park. Instead of going toward Mather Point, though, she turned east toward Desert View. She knew right where she wanted to go, and it wasn't Hopi Point. Half way along the road to Desert View, the eastern terminus of the Canyon, were several turnoffs that led to the Canyon's edge. Jane chose Moran Point. There was no one in the small parking lot. She locked her car and walked the short distance to the empty view point. The sun was setting to the west, and Jane's view was limited as she expected. This location would not be chosen as a place to watch the sunset. The lookout point faced more northeast, so that just a small image of the setting sun was visible.

Satisfied that she was alone, she returned to her car and retrieved the box from the back floor. She carried Phil's ashes gently, reverently. She'd had them shipped from a

mortuary in Columbus to one in Phoenix and had picked them up first thing after completing her rental car contract. She hadn't been without the ashes since shortly after Phil's funeral. After cremation, she'd stored them in her bedroom. Her son and daughters wondered about them earlier and assumed that one day there would be a ceremony and the ashes buried. In a year's time they seemed to have forgotten, but Jane hadn't. It took her a while to solidify her plan, but she knew that it was a decision that had been with her almost from the start.

She set the box down on the cement and knelt to unfasten it. She had an oversize purse with her and kept it close, thinking that if someone came up to the site that she would place the purse on top of the box and look out into the Canyon, apparently deep in thought, until the person or party left. She would outwait them. But, as she'd guessed, no one came while she unfastened the box.

She stood for a moment looking toward the dot of light that was the sunset and thought of Phil and their life together. "I forgive you," she whispered. Then said it again aloud. "I forgive you." It wasn't his single transgression she referred to. That had been argued out years ago. With tears and promises, they had gotten past their disappointments: he that he had broken his wedding vows in a moment of weakness and loneliness, she that somehow she had not been enough, not been able to be the single focus of his life. No, all that was past. Those scars had healed, even if the scabs they left on her soul still remained.

What she forgave him for now was abandoning her. For dying first. For leaving her alone. She didn't know if she could live alone. She was supposed to go first. Phil was so much stronger than she, much better able to withstand the loss of a life partner. In truth, she had resented his death for a full year. She didn't want to be without her husband. Was not sure how she could continue day after day alone. She didn't know if that scar would ever heal.

She reached quickly for the box, lifted the lid and swung its contents into the Canyon. "I forgive you," she hollered, and the ashes were gone before her echo. She was sobbing now, tears streaming down her face and falling into the box. She reached into her purse and pulled out a large zip-lock plastic bag, flattened the box, and placed it tenderly in the bag. She would take this tiny part of her husband clinging to the edges of the box and bury it in her garden in Ohio. She would always have part of him close by.

She walked back to her car in the dark and placed the bag on the front seat next to her. She would go back to the hotel, eat some dinner, and try to get a good night's sleep. In the morning, she would return to the Grand Canyon in time for sunrise. She would not abandon the ritual she and Phil had always followed, and one last time she would sit in the cold morning air and watch for the first rays of the sun, and as they spread across the Canyon walls awakening the warm hues that marked the beauty of this wonder, she would know her husband's spirit was part of her joy.

Wayne Rapp has written two books, *Celebrating, Honoring, and Valuing Rich Traditions: The History of the Ohio Appalachian Arts Program* for the Ohio Arts Council and *Drawn to the Living Water: Twenty Years of Spiritual Discovery* for The Spirituality Network. Wayne has also written numerous short stories, essays, and nonfiction pieces for publication. A collection of short stories, *Burnt Sienna*, was a finalist for the Miguel Mármol Award. A short story, "In the Time of Marvel and Confusion," was nominated for a Pushcart Prize. His creative writing has twice been honored with Individual Artist Excellence Awards from the Ohio Arts Council.