

The Seven Cities

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The stages that mark the wayfarer's journey from the abode of dust to the heavenly homeland are said to be seven. Some have called these Seven Valleys, and others, Seven Cities. And they say that until the wayfarer taketh leave of self, and traverseth these stages, he shall never reach to the ocean of nearness and union, nor drink of the peerless wine.

-- Bahá'u'lláh, The Seven Valleys

Cheyenne to Denver

Cheyenne is supposed to be a peaceful town. Somewhere men and women can lead gentle, peaceful lives untrammled by the stress of the big city. A place where love never dies because it is not distracted from the mundane. So why was she leaving Cheyenne? It was time. No doubting it. She had been patient with her husband's philandering. Each time he said he would stop and each time he started back up. When he gave her gonorrhea she was furious. She realized it was not patience that she needed but a better sense of justice. Continuing to be patient was not helping her or him. It was time to stop. She left. Within a month he was living with some chippy that he picked up at the tavern. She hoped that they would be happy bringing each other little gifts like chlamydia and syphilis.

Cheyenne was no longer the friendly place she thought it was. Even a year after the divorce it still looked bleak and desolate. So she was off to Arizona where her mother and stepfather had retired.

"Come and stay with us for a while, dear," her mother said. "Close your apartment, store everything, and bring some essentials. Maybe life will look better in Phoenix. It's certainly a lot warmer here."

She went one better. She sold everything except for her essentials that were contained in two boxes and a suitcase. They were now stowed in the belly of the bus. She settled in for the day's drive. She hoped that no one would sit next to her. And if someone did sit next to her she hoped he would be fascinating and gorgeous. Not that she was looking for a man. She wasn't. But it would be nice to know if all the emotions were still in tact and functioning. It seemed as though she hadn't felt anything but anger for years.

The door closed and the driver started up the bus. She was going to escape without company. She sighed. Good! Then there was a tap on the door and the driver opened it. The epitome of a cowboy climbed aboard. His big droopy mustache didn't move as he talked quietly to the driver. His long, curly, sandy-colored hair was tied at the back of his neck with a rubber band. His dress was cowboy to the max...hat, vest, jeans, boots...and slung over his arm was a leather jacket with yards of fringe.

When he turned to find a seat, Sarah couldn't look away fast enough and his pale blue eyes riveted in on hers. He walked straight to her seat and asked if he could join her. She said it was a free country. He stuffed his duffle bag and his jacket in the overhead rack and sat down. He was tall and slim and his smile was warm. He obviously wasn't from Cheyenne, she thought, nothing this warm and good-looking could come out of Wyoming.

"Where you goin'?" he asked.

"Phoenix. And you?"

"Denver. Short ride."

"Where are you coming from?" she asked.

"Green River."

"For some reason I didn't think you were from Wyoming," she said, honestly surprised.

"So what're you runnin' away from?" he asked bluntly.

"Isn't that kind of a forward question?"

"Don't like to beat around the bush."

"But... 'what're you running away from?' What makes you think that would apply to me?"

"Most everyone is searchin' for somethin' or runnin' away from somethin'," he explained.
"What're you runnin' from? Bad marriage?"

She was still taken aback by his straightforwardness.

"What makes you think I'm a runner and not a searcher?"

"The way you said you didn't think I was from Wyoming."

"Like, nothing this good could come out of Wyoming?"

"Yeah."

"You seem to have a healthy sense of yourself."

"Yep. I know who I am. I've done the runnin' *and* the searchin'." He paused then repeated, "So, are you runnin' away from a bad marriage?"

"Well, the marriage hasn't existed in over a year. I think if I am running away from anything it's myself. I didn't like what I had become there."

"Good."

"Good?"

"Yeah, good that you know what you're runnin' from. Now that you know its you, you can start being a searcher and search for yourself."

"So now you are going to tell me that if I'm looking for myself, then I must be lost. And if I am lost then I must be saved. And if I must be saved then open your heart up, sister, and let Jesus come into it. Am I right?"

"Nope. That's not what I was gonna say. Maybe that's what you need, but I sure wasn't gonna tell you that."

"You think that's what I need?"

"I haven't a clue. Everyone needs God, but I don't know if everyone needs Jesus. Just look at that fellow over there."

He nodded to a young Jewish man sitting across the aisle a row ahead of them. His head was leaning in his hand and a yarmulke pinned to the back of his head.

"He doesn't need Jesus," he said with great certainty.

"Really?" she said with surprise.

"Most likely he's found his God and is happy with him. Otherwise he wouldn't be wearing that silly little hat. If you're lookin' for yourself, you need to find your God and get to know him. Because your God will tell you a lot about you. Now, if you'll excuse me, I think I'll take a little nap." He scooted down in his seat and tipped his hat over his eyes.

"Wait. Before you drift off."

He nudged his hat off his face. "Yeah?"

"What do you mean, 'your God will tell you a lot about you'?"

"Well, if you believe that God made you in his image, then look at your God. If he is kind and lovin' and gentle, then you're likely to be kind and lovin' and gentle. If he's stern and jealous and spiteful, then you're likely to be the same. If God doesn't exist, you're going to have one hell of a time findin' yourself. Sometimes it's easier to look at God and analyze him than lookin' at yourself."

Despite herself, Sarah spent the next hour and a half analyzing her God. What was he like? Did she like him? Should she find another God? Was this even a good hypothesis that this cowboy, of all people, had? He was no expert, no doctor of divinity. Was this her making God in her image? Or had God really made her in his image? Or was the way she was just what she thought about her God?

On the outskirts of Denver the cowboy stirred, stretched and then opened his eyes. She looked at him and he smiled.

"So what's your God like?" he asked.

"Not so bad," she said. "He's good, generous, kind, loving, gentle...those things you said...and he's powerful and all-seeing, etcetera, etcetera."

"Do you like him?"

"Yeah, I do."

"Then you've gotta good chance of likin' yourself too. I can tell by your face that you are a good person. Generous, lovin', kind...just like your God. Is he limited in any way?" asked the cowboy.

"No, he's not. But how does that relate to me. I am limited."

"You're just as limited as you wanna be. Anything's possible. Stretch your God beyond the limits of your imagination because he can never be limited by you or me. Then stretch yourself beyond your imagination...that's how you grow. And is your God jealous or wrathful?"

"No. Just positive."

"Great! I've found that those negative qualities that we put on God are not him at all but us. If we keep our view of God positive then it is easy to become a better person. What else did you discover about him?" asked the cowboy.

"I'm not sure he's a he. He might be a she," she said, thinking she might get a negative rise from this oddly non-traditionally-thinking traditional man.

"Good for you!" the cowboy cheered quietly. "I don't think God has a gender, but I call God *he* just because I don't want to call him *it*."

"*It's* so impersonal," Sarah laughed.

"Yeah, and you don't want God to be impersonal."

"You're right! Thank you for your theory, it's been very mind opening."

As they approached the bus station, they passed a mission with a number of drunken men hanging around outside, several of them were passing around a bottle in a brown paper bag. One of them staggered toward the road and fell just short of the tires of the bus. Sarah and the cowboy saw it and shared a shiver, as someone came so close to death in front of them.

"They have got to be the runners and not the searchers," said Sarah.

"Not necessarily. There's an old Persian tale where this love-starved hero is sittin' in the dirt, pickin' it up and lettin' it run through his fingers. An acquaintance walks by and sees him and asks what he's doing. He says, 'I'm lookin for Layli.' Layli's his love. His friend says, 'but Layli is pure in spirit and you look for her in the dirt?' And the young man says, 'I seek her everywhere; haply somewhere I shall find her.' So when these guys get to the bottom of a bottle they may look in and say, 'Nope, he's not there either.'"

"You are really something," said Sarah, with an amazed chuckle.

"How so?"

"I don't know what is more surprising about what you just said: that *you* know an old Persian tale or that you used the word *haply* or that this all makes sense."

They laughed as they pulled into the bus terminal. The cowboy stood up and retrieved his duffle bag and jacket. Sarah held out her hand. He took it in his and tickled the back of her hand with his mustache.

"Thank you, and I sincerely mean that. And I don't even know your name," said Sarah.

"My name's Chris, ma'am, and you're certainly welcome."

Denver to Colorado Springs

In Denver half of the passengers got off. They were replaced by an equal amount plus more. The bus was packed. A pale young woman with dark hair sat next to Sarah. She had a serene smile on her face and her eyes fell lovingly on everything. She reminded Sarah of a fragile bird, with hollow bones and a light heart. Sarah was instantly fascinated by this angelic creature and watched as she situated herself in the seat. She picked up a book and opened it to a page and sat looking at the page for a good deal of the trip. The smile never left her face, and Sarah was sure that she never turned a page. She looked as though she were lost in love. As they neared Colorado Springs the young woman looked up and Sarah, attracted by her movement, met her eyes.

"Hi," she said, "My name is Pamela."

"I'm Sarah. Are you headed for Phoenix?" she asked hoping that this peaceful creature would be able to share her space for the whole journey.

"Oh, no. I'm just going to Colorado Springs."

"Family there?"

"Yes," she said with a blissful smile, "My husband." She closed her eyes to envision him better.

"How delightful," said Sarah, the words coming out of her mouth before she could process them.

"Delightful?" asked Pamela.

"Yeah....it's delightful to see someone so in love with their spouse."

Pamela smiled a shy smile and said, "I didn't know it was so obvious."

"Oh, yes...if he is the reason you're smiling like you are."

"Yes, yes, I imagine he is. We've been apart for two weeks and soon I'll be back in his arms. I miss him so much."

"So how long have you been married?"

"Six years."

"That's how long my husband and I were married."

"*Were* married?" Her dark eyebrows got closer together as a sad frown wrinkled her brow. "I'm so sorry."

"It's okay. It's been over a year now and I'm doing all right. But it's encouraging to know that such deep and intense love is possible. I don't know if I *ever* glowed with love like you do, though."

"Part of it, I'm sure, is that I'm pregnant," she smiled her shy smile again and then uncontrollably broke into a sweet tooth-filled smile. "I just had it confirmed. I'm very happy. This will be our first."

"Oh. If I just found out I was pregnant I don't think I would be so happy."

"Perhaps not in your situation. But if you had a husband as wonderful as Steven I'm sure you would be just as happy as I am. He is an absolute angel! He must be the most wonderful person in the world...I'm sure he is."

For the next several miles Sarah listened as Pamela talked joyously about her beloved Steven. How he romanced her and wooed her even though he didn't have any money and how they lived in the most humble home.

"He's so romantic. He leaves me little love notes every day. Usually in my lunch...which he insists on making for me every night before we go to bed. He says that he wants to make sure that I eat well while he is away from me. He's a wonderful cook, and does all the cooking. And he is so sensitive to all my concerns, but not at all patronizing. Sometimes I'm amazed at his ability to balance all of his emotions and my emotions. He always seems to say the exact right thing, at the exact right time, to the exact right people. He's a natural born peacemaker."

"What does he do?"

"He's a songwriter and singer. He is also a disc jockey at one of the smaller radio stations. That's not his love, but it keeps food on the table. The sacrifices he makes for me and his art are incredible."

They pulled into the bus terminal. Standing outside of the terminal were two men, a woman and a man in a wheelchair.

"There he is!" squealed Pamela, her face flushed with excitement.

A handsome young man, with dark curly hair, waved at the bus. Pamela squealed again and waved.

"He sees me. It was good talking with you, Sarah, I hope you will excuse me, but its just been too long! If you have a minute, come and meet him. But I hope you'll understand if we don't stay too long," said Pamela and she was gone.

Sarah watched as Pamela anxiously made her way to the bus door. The curly-haired man stepped forward with arms outstretched and embraced the old woman right in front of Pamela. Pamela ran past him to the young man in the wheelchair. The long arms, loosely attached to the

small crumpled body with short deformed legs, reached up and entwined his beloved with the grace of a dancer.

"This is what she was so excited about?" Sarah said aloud to herself.

Not once had Pamela mentioned anything about him living in a wheelchair. She said nothing of him being handicapped. She was just full of admiration and love for this remarkable man. Or was it she that was remarkable. A black woman who had been sitting across the aisle and had heard their conversation saw Sarah's puzzlement.

"She's got you confused, doesn't she?" the woman asked.

Sarah closed her mouth and turned toward the voice. She saw that it was addressed to her. "Yes. That's...that's incredible! And she's pregnant!"

The woman smiled and said, "When the fire of love is ablaze, it burneth to ashes the harvest of reason."

Sarah closed her eyes and repeated the words to herself. They were true. She opened her eyes and the woman was gone. Sarah was alone on the bus. Others had left their things on the bus so she knew this was the bus that was continuing on to Santa Fe.

Six years. Six years and *her* marriage was down the tubes. Six years and *their* marriage was still flying in the ether and entering a new phase with the onset of pregnancy. She never felt that way about Michael. Not even in the very beginning. Of course, there was a thrill, and the sex was great, but the way Pamela talked she would do anything for Steven and he would do anything for her. There was never that commitment between them. She had never seen two people so dedicated to each other, she had never witnessed love like that, let alone experienced it herself.

She watched them waiting for Pamela's bags to be unloaded from the bus. They talked with quiet animation. They held hands and occasionally gave each other a hug. But it was their eyes that captivated Sarah. The way they looked at each other. It was almost tangible. Sarah thought that if she were standing there with them the two of them together would probably give off a fragrance of indescribable beauty.

Then suddenly she felt their love. It was totally unselfish and pure. It filled her with a joy she had never felt before. Tears sprang to her eyes and overflowed onto her cheeks. The little twinge of jealousy and loss that she felt earlier was gone and replaced with a warmth that filled her. But there was a strange sweet pain that seemed to accompany the joy. She sent her heart and her love to these two precious lovers. She watched them as they walked away, him, with one of her bags on his lap, and her, with a bag in one hand and her other hand gently caressing the back of his head.

Sarah put her head back against the seat, tears still flowing unobstructed by a tissue or sleeve. She closed her eyes and fell asleep.

Colorado Springs to Santa Fe

Sarah was awakened as someone bumped into her seat. It was a man of mixed heritage...probably part black and part Hispanic, Sarah wasn't sure. He wore glasses and had his

hair pulled back in a short curly ponytail at the back of his head. He was trying to get a large soft-sided garment bag in the overhead rack without too much success. Finally he put the shopping bag he had in his left hand next to Sarah so he could use both hands. Cumin greeted her nose and she realized she was hungry.

"Smells good," said Sarah.

"Lunch," he said and smiled.

When he smiled at her he showed a gold tooth among white. The smile was surrounded by a neatly trimmed beard. She smiled warmly at him, not really knowing how to handle this new lightness in her heart. Not quite knowing whether to trust it or not. She marveled at herself.

"Is this seat taken?" he asked.

"No," she said.

"Is it all right if I leave my bag there?"

"If I get some of whatever smells so good."

"Sure, there's plenty," he replied with English embellished in a Puerto Rican accent.

He sat in the seat behind her next to a man she saw get on in Denver. He was white and kind of scroungy. He wore an army jacket over a Harley-Davidson t-shirt and baggy camouflage pants. He looked like he would smell bad. Sarah decided to kill two birds with one stone...calm her hunger with an orange and, if the guy behind her were awakened and let go of some of his odor, the orange peel would mask it.

"Eric," he said awakening the sleeper.

"Ramon, you old son of bitch! Where have you been keeping yourself?" asked the white guy.

"I found a nice little house in Manitou Springs. I've been living there for a year," said Ramon.

The men talked off and on for a couple of hours. Their conversation didn't interest Sarah until she heard the word Los Alamos, a national laboratory that had developed the atomic bomb. Her ears picked up, her father had died of cancer too young in life because of his exposure to radiation there.

"I'm going to Los Alamos for a job interview," said Ramon.

"Los Alamos? The Laboratory?"

"That's righ'."

Sarah decided that eavesdropping on a bus is probably the next best time-passer next to talking or reading, and probably couldn't be counted as unethical or invasive on a bus. She tuned into their conversation.

"What kind of job?"

"Engineering. Rocket propulsion and guidance systems."

"You mean you are a real rocket scientist?"

"Yep."

"Oh, yeah, I remember in rehab you said that you used to work for Martin Marietta."

"That's righ'" said Ramon.

"Why'd you leave there anyway?"

"Got fired."

"What'd you do hit the boss?"

"No," he said with amused disgust. "I got old and expensive. In my sixteen year, in May, I got employee of the month and the nex' month they fire me."

Sarah felt herself cringe at the story and it had just started. She braced herself.

"They had a whole bunch of new, young hot-shot engineers fresh out of engineering school that they paid half as much as they pay me. They could overwork them until *they* were forty-seven. They didn't need me." Ramon paused a moment then asked, "So you still clean?"

"I'm clean. But I can't say *st///* clean. I've been on and off the wagon for years now. The flashbacks are what get me. They get so bad the only thing I can think about is making them stop."

"Ironic. They were wha' finally made me sober."

"It's been so long since I seen you, I can't remember how that worked," said Eric.

Sarah decided that these two vets must have been in a recovery group together. The only time she had heard gut level talk was when she went to Al Anon meetings in Cheyenne just before she and her husband split.

"After I got fired I wen' home and got drunk. I stayed drunk for the nex' six months. One day as I lay drunk on my bed, my wife came in and told me she was going. She was taking my daughters and her lawyer would be talking to me soon. When it was all over I had a mattress, two pots, and my car. I ate and drank and slep'...but mostly I drank. I gained eighty pounds. I stayed drunk for mos' of two years. And then the flashbacks started."

"That's when you went to the VA?"

"Yeah. But as I detoxed they came worse. An' then I would damn everyone. Damn America for sending us there. Damn Captain Richardson for telling me to fall back to res'. Damn

the Viet Cong for killing them. Damn Martin Marietta for firing me. Damn my wife for taking my daughters. Damn me for surviving the war in the first place."

Sarah was turned so that her back was against the window. She looked at Ramon through the crack between the seats, her arms crossed in front of her belly to keep any more emotion from penetrating, wondering if he might explode in her face. He sat quietly for a minute. Had he run out of people to damn?

Suddenly there was a loud bang and the bus swerved to the left and then to the right. The driver over corrected. Screams and shouts erupted throughout the bus. Sarah hung on and wondered why they didn't install seat belts on buses. They soon found themselves off the road in a ditch. Luckily the bus was still upright. They got out of the bus quickly. Sarah picked up her purple backpack and Ramon's bag of food. She showed him that she had it and he nodded thanks and he pulled his other stuff off the overhead rack.

There aren't too many trees south of Raton, so when the company of travelers saw the one lone cottonwood they made their way toward it. The shade was all taken by the time Sarah got there. She judged the path of the sun and staked her claim just outside of the shady area. She got out the sunscreen and applied it. Ramon and Eric joined her. She passed around her sunscreen and it made its way all the way around the group only to come back to her empty. She put the empty container back in her backpack.

The bus driver joined the group.

"They're sending another bus from Santa Fe. We should be on our way again in about two hours. So everyone relax."

A general moan went around the group.

"What about our bags and things?" someone asked.

"Everything will be transferred to the second bus and will continue to travel with you," said the bus driver.

"Yeah, right," said Eric with cynicism.

"Come on, Eric," said Ramon. "You've got to have faith in something. That things happen right more often than not."

"Look at where you are, man," said Eric. "You're sitting in the sun in the middle of a fucking desert because something went wrong and you tell me to have faith?"

"Chances are that things won't get any worse than this," said Ramon. "One disaster a day is probably the worse fate will dish out."

"You're not taking into account the ripple effect," said Eric.

"The ripple effect?" asked Sarah.

"You get in the sun and someone has heat stroke, and dies. Someone gets sunburned and can't go to their job interview and ends up being out of a job for another four years...or something else happens...all because of a flat tire."

"Everything is going to be all right here. She shared her sunscreen. I'll share my food. Everyone got a water bottle or a Big Gulp cup. And we found a tree," said Ramon.

"What makes you so optimistic?" Sarah asked of Ramon as he started unpacking his bag of food.

"Life is hard, but hard is what makes you strong."

"It would seem to me that a hard life would make you more cynical than optimistic," said Sarah.

"I guess it depends. In my life one thing came after the other. I thought I couldn't go no more. It was like I was chased to a cliff and made to jump. Only when I jump I find I can fly. I found God and God calmed my soul."

"But didn't it make you bitter to lose all those things you worked so hard to get?" asked Sarah.

"I found I didn't need all those material things. I live on twenty percent of what I used to but now I have more."

"How so?" challenged Eric.

"I am happy. I have peace of mind. I have my daughters' love. I cook beans and rice. I have lost sixty pounds. I am more healthy than before. When it gets very cold I drive down to Mexico or visit family in Puerto Rico. If I had known that the war and Martin Marietta would chase me to be like this, I wouldn't have damned no one...I would have praised them. I would have been able to see peace in war and justice in injustice."

"But you can't see the outcome of everything, can you?" said Sarah.

"No," said Ramon, "plan for the worst and hope for the best. So who wants food?"

"I do," said Sarah. "And I have five pounds of oranges in my backpack."

Ramon did the fishes and loaves trick. When everyone shared their food, no one was without. He turned out to be a pretty good cook and Sarah's oranges were a nice compliment.

The shadow of the cottonwood widened to include Sarah and her meal mates. They ate and talked quietly. Then Sarah, with a new boldness asked Ramon, "So if everything is going so well and you are so happy, why are you going to apply for this job?"

"I don't know. I thought maybe if I had a job I could get a wife. Sometimes I miss taking someone to a concert or to the opera. But you know what? Telling you this has changed my mind. I'll just enjoy Santa Fe and then go home. Sometimes I just do what the wind tells me. Then everything works out right. It is a good place to be."

They were back in the bus and headed back toward Santa Fe before any of Eric's prophecies came true. Sarah watched the fields and distant hills pass by, each turn revealing another mystery with its own beauty. In the landscape she saw peace in war and justice in injustice, and in justice she saw grace. This new knowledge suddenly took residence in her body and in her mind. She could finally see the big picture. A serenity spread over her the farther she got from Cheyenne. But she knew it was not because the scenery was changing but because *she* was changing.

The drone of the bus and the flashing fence posts calmed the already serene Sarah into sleep.

Santa Fe to Albuquerque

When the bus pulled into Santa Fe, Sarah said goodbye to the rocket scientist and decided to stretch her legs. As she was getting up from her seat her eyes met those of the black woman across the aisle.

"Are you getting off here?" asked the woman.

"I've just got to stretch my legs. Maybe go for a walk.," answered Sarah.

"I was thinking of doing the same thing. Maybe we should do it together...you know, the safety in numbers saying is true."

"Fine," said Sarah, "that's probably wise. My name is Sarah Collins."

"My name is Sara also, Sara Petersen," said the young woman holding out her hand. Sara was tall and slim and had a rich color to her skin that rivaled dark chocolate. Her hair was cropped close to her head and big loop earrings hung from small ears. She looked stunning in orange. Gold bangles shared space on her wrist with a bracelet of cut crystals.

Sarah took Sara's hand and squeezed it warmly. The warmth was returned.

"So are you Sarah with or without the 'H'?" asked Sara.

"With."

"I'm without. To distinguish me from my grandmother."

"I was also named after my grandmother."

"So what else do we have in common?" asked Sara. And that started twenty minutes of discovery as they walked around the neighborhood of the Santa Fe bus terminal. Amazingly they found an incredible number of things in common from their birthdays (two days and two years apart) to their place in the family (middle child between two boys) to professional interests (Sara was a writer who always wanted to be an artist, and Sarah was an artist who always wanted to be a writer).

By the time they got back to the terminal they were old friends. They sat together when they reboarded the bus to continue their conversation. They traded addresses. Sara's new address

in Albuquerque, where she just landed a job with an ad agency. And Sarah's new address in Phoenix with her mother.

"Besides the move," asked Sara, "what's new and wonderful in your life?"

"Well, today I think I found God and now I'm not sure just what to do about it."

"I don't think you *do* anything with God...except worship him and love him and know him."

"That's a big order," said Sarah, "but that's also where the confusion comes in. The big how-do-I-do-this part. Do I join a convent and wear hair-shirts for the rest of my life?"

Sara laughed, "I really don't think that's necessary."

"So what do I do?" asked Sarah with a great deal of sincerity.

"Have you thought of going to church?"

"Yeah, but for some reason that's not too comforting. It just doesn't seem like the right answer. I feel closer to God on this bus than I ever have in a church," she said with a bit of cynicism in her voice.

"So maybe you should convert an old bus into a church, park it somewhere in the desert, and visit it on a weekly basis," teased Sara.

Sarah laughed.

"Don't mind me," said Sara, "one of my assets in my work is creative option generating."

"Well, good, let's generate some options."

"If you want to find a church, just look in the yellow pages. A friend of mine did that once. Decided to call the first one he put his finger on. It was Assembly of God. He thought to himself, 'well, if they are still in the process of assembling God, they are not for me...sounds like too much work!'"

"Did he actually find one that way?"

"Yeah, he chose the second one and he's been with them for ten years now."

"What was it?"

"I can't remember the name, a quiet religion...it wasn't even Christian. But it was right for him."

"That's something else I've been grappling with. Maybe something else other than Christianity is what I need," said Sarah.

"That seems rather radical to me."

"Maybe I need something radical."

"You certainly can get that within Christianity without giving up Christ. Giving up Christ is pretty scary. Besides, what would my parents say?"

"Do you think that was a concern to St. Peter when he started to follow Christ?" said Sarah, entering into uncharted territory in her mind.

"I've never thought of it like that."

"After all, he and Christ were both Jews. Judaism was the standard at that time in history. Think of the peer pressure in such a closed society...there were no reformed synagogues then."

"Wow, new respect for early Christians has just struck me."

"Besides, I don't think I want to give up Christ, either, it would be like putting out an eye to have a new perspective on the world. Doesn't sound right."

The two women sat in silence for a while then Sara said, "But you know, other religions have holy books. They have values and morals. They turn out good people and orderly societies. I have a friend that's a Moslem and he tells me on a regular basis all of the things that we consider part of Christian civilization that actually came from Islamic civilization."

"Like what?"

"Like bathing and algebra and aspirin and plumbing and lighted streets and I can't remember everything. The fact is, we might not be looking deep enough."

"What do you mean?"

"What seems to be the driving force behind each of these religions?"

"A prophet?"

"Yes and no...behind every great prophet is God."

"So are you suggesting that all the religions share the same God?"

"Isn't that the first commandment? 'The Lord thy God is one. Put no other gods before him.'"

"You're right. If I have one God and you have another we can conclude one of two things, either there are two Gods and our God is lying to us, or we are sharing the same God and just calling him by different names."

Sarah and Sara smiled smugly with this new revelation.

"This is terrific!" said Sara and she raised her arms and stretched. A ray of sunlight caught a crystal hanging from her bracelet and set little rainbows dancing around the seats and on their laps.

"Oh, look!" Sarah said excitedly, "The crystal is refracting the sunlight!"

"Don't you just love those little rainbows?"

"Yes, but that's not the point. The sun is the source of the light...it comes in white and breaks up into eight different colors, just like God is the source of the religions and it comes through the prism of humanity and breaks out into what seems like different religions. In actuality the light is the same, just the position on the prism that makes for a difference in the color. Is this cool or what?"

"Way cool!" answered Sara, not knowing whether her answer or the sudden feeling of giddiness over the discovery was making her feel younger than her years.

The women slipped into quiet contemplation. A sense of unity enveloped them and in turn united them with the world at large. Suddenly it was as though everything they saw, they saw through the eyes of God. And everything they heard, they heard through the ears of God. Yet there remained a sanctified distance between them and God. A distance that allowed God to be closer to them than their own hearts without being misconstrued as being a part of his creation.

When they parted in Albuquerque it was with tears and hugs. They both promised to write and, if their searchings even brought them close to a religion or church that seemed to fit the ideas they talked about they would call. The agreement was sealed with another hug and the new old-friends parted.

Albuquerque to Flagstaff

The stars stood out brightly against the blackness of the clear night sky once the lights of the city had dimmed. Sarah had napped so much during the day she was nowhere near sleep now. Her fellow travelers took advantage of the dark. An occasional snore ripped through the quiet that was sandwiched between the serenity of the desert and the drone of the bus.

And Sarah...Sarah felt contented. It must have taken her an hour to decide what that feeling actually was because she had never experienced it before. Not as a child, definitely not as a teenager, not in her marriage and not out of her marriage. Now she could look at her life and be happy with it. She could see her flaws and weaknesses. She could see the trials she had endured and the hardships she had witnessed. She could see it all and feel it all and know blissfully that she was happy...contented. No remorse clung to her.

The only time that came close to it was right around her divorce. She could see her life with some objectivity and without judgment at that point but she definitely wasn't blissful. It was more like numb. Being alone then had a sharpness to it that was tempered with bitterness. Now in being alone there was a comfort that she had not experienced before. A quiet that did not echo. A calmness that soothed the soul.

Before her her life was as clear as the night sky and just as beautiful.

Flagstaff to The Grand Canyon

It was still dark when they rolled into Flagstaff. Several people got off and Sarah decided to get off the bus and walk around. Inside the terminal slash convenience store were pictures and

souvenirs of the Grand Canyon. The Grand Canyon! She had never seen the Grand Canyon before. She rushed to the bus driver.

"What would happen if I didn't get back on the bus until tomorrow night?" she asked.

"Your bags would arrive ahead of you, you'd have to pay a slight missing-your-bus penalty, and you'd see the Grand Canyon," he said, as though he'd done this many times before.

"Would they hold my bags in a safe place in Phoenix?"

"I'd make sure that they did...just for you," he promised.

"Great! I'm going to stay!"

Her bags were remarked, a phone call was made to her mother, the missing-your-bus penalty was paid, and the next day's bus schedule was found. As she picked up her jacket and her backpack she giggled at herself. She had never done anything this spontaneous before. What was becoming of her? Who cared? This felt too good to reconsider. Back in the convenience store she asked the clerk if there was some way to get to the Grand Canyon in time to watch the sun come up.

"I'll take you," said a voice to her side. "I had planned to watch the sunrise there myself."

The voice came from a tall slim Indian. He looked at her with gentle smiling eyes captured within a round brown face. His long hair was swept over his ears and hung down his back. He looked like he was about fifty years old and spoke with a Midwestern accent with a twinge of something else...like he learned to speak English when he was eight or ten.

They climbed in his dusty blue pickup and headed into the blackness of the night.

"My name is Alfred," he said, offering his hand sideways to Sarah. She shook it.

"I'm Sarah," she said. "My father's name was Alfred."

"Every year I try to come and greet the sun at least once. Every year I bring one of my children. Now they are all grown and too busy to come with me. The grandchildren are still too young, according to their parents. It's good that your father's name was Alfred. Today you can be my child and I will be your father. I'm glad to have the company."

"It's my pleasure."

They left the main highway and bumped along rutted back roads for a while. The sky was a deep blue when they reached the canyon edge. A swirl of earth reached out into the canyon and faced east. Alfred led Sarah onto the finger of land. This was not a place where tourists usually came to look at the view. There were no guardrails. Sarah couldn't see the bottom of the canyon because it was still filled with night, but she could sense there was an immense distance between her and the canyon floor. Her knees shook and a knot tightened in her stomach. She sat down unexpectedly and felt more secure with her center of gravity planted firmly on the earth.

The clouds hanging on the horizon turned pink and orange as the sky lightened. Alfred walked to the rim and raised his hands in the direction of the sunrise. With reverence he recited a

prayer in Navajo. He turned to the west and recited another prayer. Then he turned north and south and repeated the prayer.

He joined her on the ground and together watched in reverence as the sun pierced the horizon. As it edged its way up, the tops of the western cliffs were outlined in brilliance and the ridges below started to take shape. The purples and blues of the night were replaced by the reds and oranges of the day. Sarah was struck dumb by the majesty and grandeur of the scene. Her eyes were filled with wonder. Everywhere she looked she was met with a new vision of magnificence. They sat in silence for a long time. Then Alfred stood, breaking Sarah's state of reverie. She realized the sun had climbed fairly high in the sky and was burning away the last of the morning mist that clung to the trees.

"We should get out of the sun before it starts its magic on us," said Alfred. He extended a hand to help her up.

As Sarah stood she suddenly became aware of where they were and the height they were above the canyon floor. Dizziness struck her and she grasped Alfred before the chasm could suck her to her death.

"Vertigo," he said. He took one of her hands and put his other arm around her back. "Close your eyes and I will lead you away from the edge. You will feel better then."

A moment later he put her hand on the pickup and she opened her eyes. The spinning had stopped.

"As long as you were sitting and you looked across the canyon it was theory. When you stood and could actually see down, it became reality," he explained. "Did you know that you were afraid of heights?"

"Vaguely. But I never experienced anything like this before."

"I can help you get over it. Are you interested?"

"Sure."

"Let's have some coffee first."

After coffee Alfred found a tree near the edge and tied a rope around it and attached some rock climbing hooks and loops. He handed Sarah a harness and climbed into one himself. He showed her how to tie the ropes and explained the setup to her. Then he threw the rope over the side.

"You just want me to go over the side?" asked Sarah with a shudder.

"No, I wouldn't do that to you," he said with a wry smile. "We're going to go for a little walk first."

"Then you're going to throw me over the side?" Sarah asked.

"Something like that."

Alfred took her to an eroded crack that wound toward the canyon rim and then opened up into a cave. Alfred flicked on a flashlight. They climbed over rocks in the cave and continued to descend. They saw daylight and headed toward it. The cave opened up onto a ledge that ran along the canyon wall. Sarah's eyes widened. A little way down the ledge was Alfred's rope.

"As we go out I want you to face the wall and only look at me and the wall," Alfred said as he took her hand. She did as instructed and they soon stood at the rope. Alfred tied the rope to the loop on her harness. Then he gave her basic climbing instructions.

"When you start to climb, you will be scared. That's alright. Just draw courage from the pit of your stomach and continue. You won't be in any danger, you will just feel like you are in danger. This process is perfectly safe and I will be at the top holding on and helping you up. When the fear is very great, stop. Breathe. Focus on something close to you. The patterns in the rock. A flower growing out of a crack. The blueness of the sky right above you. If you feel at all courageous, look down. If you don't want to be scared any more than you will feel initially, don't look down. You got that?"

Sarah nodded. It seemed a bit difficult to breathe. He tested the rope and checked the knot on her harness. Then he looked into her eyes with great seriousness.

"This is the only way you can get back up. When I leave I will take the flashlight. I will be up quicker than it took us to get down. I will be out of sight before you could get that knot untied. If you untie the knot you may not be able to get it tied properly again so that you will be safe. So don't even try." He searched her eyes and face. She was going to be fine.

"Okay," he said. "Now it's time to look at the Grand Canyon." He stepped around her and she experienced standing, unprotected, on the edge of a canyon face. Hundreds of feet below her was the canyon floor and above her was nothing but rock and sky. Sarah swayed. She leaned against the wall and shook.

"I'm going up now. I will tug on the rope when I get to the top and set up. When you start to climb, shout 'climbing.' When you need me to give you slack, shout, 'slack.' If you need me to take up the slack, shout "up." And if you fall, shout, "falling."

"If I fall?!" shouted Sarah on the verge of hysteria.

"Yeah, if you fall. Remember that if you fall you will only fall as far as the slack in the rope goes. I will be pulling the rope up from the top."

Alfred disappeared into the cave. Sarah stood with her back to the wall, fingernails clutching rock. The expanse before her was breath taking...so much so that she could hardly breathe. She closed her eyes and concentrated on her breathing. As her breathing calmed, so did her heart beat which had been pounding in her ears deafening her to the sounds of the canyon. A few minutes later there was a tug on the rope. She turned her back on the canyon and searched for her first hand and foot holds up the wall. She followed directions perfectly. When she got scared, she stopped, breathed, and studied something close by. After what seemed like an eternity, she was at the top. She didn't know whether to kiss Alfred for not letting her fall or slug him for what he just put her through. She hugged him. Then she walked past him and sat on a rock and cried. Alfred quietly collected the ropes and gear and put them into the truck. She got up and walked around and cried some more. When she seemed to be out of tears, Alfred appeared before her and offered her some water.

"Replenish the tears," he said.

"You want me to cry?"

"Until you don't need to any more. It's part of the process. You'll cry again this evening and then it will be over."

She drank the water but didn't feel like she needed to cry. Alfred had a small campfire going and was cooking some eggs in bacon-grease.

"You're not a vegetarian are you?"

"Not today."

"Well, here is your weekly allotment of cholesterol," he said handing her a plate.

"Thanks. This whole event was truly a miracle."

"You are right," he said with seriousness. "Every element of the Great Spirit's creation has a miracle. And every miracle has two sides to it. A material side and a spiritual side. As humans we must find both sides and see how they fit into our lives...where the relevance is."

"Why are there two sides?" asked Sarah.

"The Great Spirit created us in his image. Not our physical selves but the spiritual part of us. God put spiritual beings in a material world."

"So we have to find the spiritual lessons in the material?"

"Yes. As we dig them out, we relate them to our essential being. Then we grow closer to God. That is our quest."

"If that's so, what is the spiritual lesson to learn from my trial on the cliff?" asked Sarah with sincerity.

"You found that you can overcome anything. Even your deepest fear. You learned to reflect the attribute of God called power."

"Do you push all your kids over a cliff?"

"Just the ones that are afraid of heights. You have to face your fears or you will live them. Besides, my father did it to me."

"You were afraid of heights?"

"Terrified. When I got to the top I didn't just cry, I threw up. What you did was courageous."

"I didn't feel courageous."

"Of course not. You felt fear. You have to feel fear in order to be courageous. If you have no fear, it is just an exercise of your skill. Now you will be able to look at the canyon with a new eye. An eye of love and wonderment. Because fear and love can not live in the same heart."

When they were finished with breakfast they went back to the rim. Amazingly there was no fear. Her legs did not shake, there was no knot in her stomach and the desire to jump was gone. He was right. She could look down and just be filled with the awesomeness of the sight and love for its Creator.

"I brought an old man here once and all he could say was, 'Oh Lord, increase my astonishment at Thee!' I have adopted that saying for myself. No matter how many times I see this, no matter how many times I see the snow fall or the sun set, my astonishment is increased and my love grows. It grows and it mingles with holiness."

Phoenix

Phoenix is a pretty city. The wide roads are lined with royal palms. The buildings are modern and spacious and cool. The suburbs sparkle white with a distinct Spanish quality. And the people who aren't escapees from the Midwest, are brown and alive and beautiful.

Sarah splashed water on her face. "What an appropriate place to start a new life," she thought. "I have plunged into the fire, been consumed and now I am reemerging."

She looked at her image in the mirror, "Do they have different mirrors here or is it the light?" She was different. There was a serenity in her countenance that she had never seen before. She liked it.

Picking up her backpack she headed to the baggage storage room. She wanted to get her suitcase and two boxes...all her possessions in the world...before her mother got there to pick her up. She handed the clerk her claim checks with the explanation that they should have come in the day before. After a few moments he came back to tell her that they weren't there.

"Please check again. There is a big brown suitcase and two cardboard boxes about this big," she spread out her hands and measured the boxes off for him. He frowned and went into the storage room again. He returned empty-handed.

"Sorry, I can't find them."

"You can't find them?!" a familiar voice shouted from just behind Sarah.

Sarah turned to see her mother, color coordinated as usual. This time it was aqua, from her cowboy hat to her three-inch strapped heels. A small fortune in Indian silver and turquoise hung from ears, neck, arms, and waist.

"No, ma'am," the clerk said to Sarah's mother.

With that she lit into the poor man as though he had personally absconded with Sarah's stuff and was willfully keeping it hidden away.

When she stopped for a breath Sarah said, "Hello, Mother, it's good to see you."

"Sarah, dear, it's so good to see you. But, dear, they have stolen your things."

"Mother, they didn't steal them, they lost them. And most likely this man here didn't even do that."

"Oh, dear, I'm getting a little emotional again, aren't I?"

Sarah's diversion allowed the clerk to find the lost baggage claim and he pushed it toward her with a pen and escaped. After Sarah filled out the paperwork she turned to her mother and gave her a hug.

"Thanks for coming to get me. It's good to be here. It's a beautiful city."

"Sweetheart, let me look at you. You look wonderful! A little messy from traveling but I have truly never seen you looking lovelier. You are actually glowing! Are you in love? What is it?"

Just then the clerk came back. He looked over the papers and then asked what was in the boxes and suitcase.

Sarah shrugged and smiled then said, "All of my worldly possessions."

"Everything, Sarah?"

"Everything," she repeated with a lightness in her heart. She broke out into a huge smile and laughed quietly.

"That's terrible, dear! And I'm so confused...why are you laughing?"

"I'm laughing because I'm happy."

"But if you don't have anything you're poor and how can you be happy when you're poor?"

"I'm poor in the things of this world and rich in God. Poor in the world, but rich in my relationship to its creator. Do you see the difference, Mother? If I have God I don't *need* anything else."

"Oh, my! Sarah, you've got religion! I don't know if I like that or not!"

"Mother, I haven't got religion. I've got God. And why shouldn't you like that? It's made me clearer about who I am in this world."

"But to be happy about being poor! Oh, this is awful, awful, awful!"

"It doesn't seem awful at all. As a matter of fact I have never felt so free in my life! I don't have any attachments to this world. It's not that I don't own anything, it's that nothing owns me. This is wonderful!"

"Oh, Sarah, Sarah, Sarah! I don't think I understand you anymore. You just aren't the same girl I used to know in Wyoming."

"You're right, Mother, I'm not the same girl that you knew in Wyoming. I am changed...wonderfully, wonderfully changed. I have nothing but me to give and I'm ready to give myself. Nothing is holding me down. Nothing is holding me back. Nothing is standing in my way. Obviously, I've got to develop a strategy for my new life, but this is a great way to start it!"

"What are you going to do, dear?"

"I'm going to paint, Mother. I'm going to paint huge, wonderful, beautiful canvases. You'll be amazed. I'll be amazed. Oh, Lord, increase my astonishment at Thee!"