

Snapshot

By **Uma Anyar**

Part One: Molly's Story

I do not need a snapshot to help me remember our family vacation to the Grand Canyon when I was ten years old and my sister Amanda was thirteen. It was a trip my father planned for months. He poured over maps, plotted out driving routes and read every book available in our local library on the Grand Canyon. He even managed to wheedle Uncle Samuel into loaning us his Silver Stream Winnebago in exchange for some favor only the men were privileged to know.

My father was a mild-mannered guy but he had his passions and they all had to do with buried remains. Indian ruins enthralled him; flint stones formed into arrowheads thousands of years ago by human hands were almost sacred. Pottery shards, clay beads and ancient cooking pots thrilled him in ways the rest of us could not understand. Father worked for the State of Kansas Agricultural Department. He was a chemist and had been promoted to middle management of the food and dairy laboratory. He was responsible for the health and well being of anyone who drank milk or consumed meat, for this he received a decent salary. But his heart belonged to Indiana Jones. Dad discovered his passion for archeology after he had acquired a PH.D. in chemistry, after he had married our mother and after Amanda and I came along.

He had to make a living and he did what he had to do without complaint. But on weekends he volunteered his assistance on various archeological surveys and test digs which State law required in areas where new roads were planned. The government was sensitive to Indian burial ground issues. My father felt it was his honorable duty to help repatriate ancestral bones to proper burial grounds, rather than ignore them and just pour more asphalt on the earth. My mother was not happy with this arrangement and felt abandoned while Dad went out to "play in the dirt." She thought he should be spending more quality time with his family. She complained that we would grow up not knowing our father and turn into wild, bad women seeking the attention of every Tom, Dick and Harry that happened along. I think Mom missed him

more than we did and used us as a good argument he couldn't refute. Mom blamed Dad's obsession with things buried in the ground on his being born under the sign of Virgo. It was an earth sign and so it made sense to her that Dad would be drawn to dirt. But it didn't excuse him from his family obligations.

"If you dig carefully and you dig deep enough, you will find something more valuable than gold," my father said while my mother passed the mashed potatoes across the dinner table. Amanda rolled her eyes as Mom said, "And what might that be?" in an exaggerated tone of wonderment. Mom often played straight man to Dad's enthusiastic pronouncements. "History, woman, prehistory, the story of the past written in remains, something I bet you girls never thought about."

Dad wanted us to share in his passion even though we were girls. He never thought girls were inferior to boys the way some men do. We were better than most girls at boy things and this pleased Dad but worried Mother, who considered herself a feminist, also felt that strong, independent women, despite their worldly success, were secretly lonely.

So, in the winter of 1986, Dad came up with a plan of how to do what he loved and not ignore his family. He worked over-time and racked up enough hours to merit a three-week vacation. He made reservations at the North Rim campgrounds and at Canyon de Chelly, which was on Navajo land and had been photographed in the 1870's by Timothy O'Sullivan for the Wheeler Geological Survey. I think that Dad was born too late, as he would have been a great guy to have along on that exploratory expedition. He loved being outdoors and he knew how to measure things. He found a book that showed the old photograph of White House Ruin, telling us that it was the home to the Anasazi, an ancient tribe of Native Americans. "Is that where we got the name for the other White House?" I asked, and Dad started laughing. I didn't see why it was a mistake because if the Indians had a white house and they were here before the Puritans and the white settlers then our white house must be named after their white house. Amanda sighed heavily and said I didn't get it, as the two white houses had nothing to do with each other. Father chuckled and said he liked my version of history better than the official one.

Mom thought it unnatural to have to reserve a patch of ground as if it were a hotel room. But she didn't harp on it. Everyone was excited about seeing the Grand Canyon.

After three days of steady driving, we entered the national park, paid our fee, and pitched our tent on Site Twenty-three. It wasn't very picturesque, but it was in the woods and smelled of pine trees that were taller than the trees back home. Our campsite neighbors told us that the best overlook spot wasn't too far away. We were giddy with excitement and could not wait any longer to see one of the seven natural wonders of the world for ourselves.

Dad led the way while Mom slowed her pace and waited for us to catch up. I had Boxer, my Chihuahua, on a leash, and Amanda sported her birthday Kodak Brownie suspended from around her neck. We reached the overlook and ran up to the iron railing and peered into the vast precipice. "Molly, get back!" Mom yelled at me and roughly grabbed my arm and told me to be careful. "Girls, listen to your mother and don't start horsing around," admonished Dad in a serious tone. We did as we were told but I wanted to keep looking so I sat on the ground and held Boxer tightly in my arms and stared into the bigness of it. Amanda looked into the canyon and after saying "Holy cow! Holy cow!" several times she stopped looking and started fidgeting with her camera. She took one, two, three pictures of the vast silence beyond us and then pursed her lips and contemplated another composition. "Molly, stand up and hold Boxer so I can take your picture." She directed me to a spot she liked and pulled my pigtails back. "That's better. Hold Boxer up." I did as I was told because I knew she wouldn't leave me alone until she got what she wanted. Mom and Dad were trading binoculars and pointing at birds sailing in the vast blue sky. "Red-tailed hawk," my father pronounced with authority. Mom tried to follow his pointing finger but only succeeded in becoming frustrated by the effort. She wasn't a natural bird spotter and she was afraid it diminished her in my father's eyes.

A sudden gust of wind swirled across the overlook platform scattering dry leaves in the air and out into the beyond. Presently, I heard car tires disturb the sandy road above us and minutes later watched a Japanese couple come down the steps and on to the overlook platform. The woman was carrying a baby wrapped snugly in a cotton blanket, even though it wasn't cold. The baby was wearing a cute little pink baseball

cap. The husband spoke in a language I had never heard before but I could tell he wanted his wife to stand in front of the railing with the baby in her arms and the Grand Canyon behind them. The Grand Canyon is more than a mile deep and just too immense to capture. It refuses to squeeze itself into a snapshot. The gift shops sell jumbo-sized glossy photographic postcards taken by professional photographers, views of the chasm at sunrise or sunset in summer and in winter. Take your pick. But even these expert renditions come up short before the presence of the actual thing, which persistently eludes complete comprehension. Tourists sense this disturbing awesomeness and turn toward what is psychologically manageable, placing family members in front of the wondrous gorge. It is easier to prove one was at the Grand Canyon with a snapshot than to apprehend it in any significant personal way.

The young father kept talking and waving with his left hand as if guiding his subject into the best pose. The pretty wife edged up to the railing and hoisted herself up just a little so that she was sort of sitting on the edge of the biggest hole on earth. I was glad Mom was too busy arguing with Dad about what kind of bird he had spotted. Mom hates edges. The husband was stepping backward and forwards composing the best possible picture when Amanda, who was doing the same thing, suddenly stepped to the side and bumped into the man, who jumped a little and his shoe came down on my sister's sandaled foot. Amanda let out a piercing scream. She had a tendency to exaggerate small hurts or embarrassments. Just as she screamed, I saw the young wife and baby topple backwards: the startling screech had unbalanced them. The man turned from Amanda and we all saw a pair of legs fan the air like a cartoon figure. The man shouted "Akiko!" It took only a few seconds before we reached the railing and gawked into the vast space. Mother and child had vanished. One second they were in front of the railing, the next they were not. Strangely, they hadn't uttered a single peep on their way into oblivion.

I laughed because it was all so ridiculous and nothing felt real. We stared into the canyon on the slimmest hope but all we heard was the wind. Above us the sky turned dark blue and the wind stirred the pine trees and set the creosote bushes to trembling. Suddenly big raindrops were falling on all of us as if the heavens were weeping. The young father stood stark still, frozen in place, his mouth still open but no sound escaping. My mother grabbed our hands and clasped us to either side of

her body with firm arms. There were words between my mother and father but I didn't hear them. Mom scurried us back to the campsite by the small path through the pinewoods. We were soaked to the bone and shivering. Mother ordered us to change our clothes and go to bed in the trailer. She was fussing over our wet tee shirts because it was something she could deal with, something she had power over. My father drove the Japanese man to the Ranger station. He was gone only an hour but when he returned he looked much older. We said nothing to our campground neighbors. How could we since words were suddenly futile? Also, we didn't want to be a part of the ridicules tragedy that had occurred right before our eyes. We were all too horrified and inexplicably ashamed.

The next day we packed up and drove out of the park. Dad did not entertain us with facts and numbers about the Grand Canyon. Mother stared out the window and checked the map over and over in an effort to co-pilot Dad onto the fastest road back to Kansas.

A month after we had settled into our summer routine Mother was once again trying to comfort my sister. I stood in the hallway behind the door and heard Mom say " You can't take that woman's death on your shoulders, Amanda. She might have fallen even if you had not screamed. It was a stupid thing to do, to sit on a railing." My mother was talking in a calm even voice trying to be reasonable. But Amanda would have none of it, and she shouted, "You can't be sure of that!" Mom startled at the sound of her daughter's shrill voice, jumped in her seat on the edge of Amanda's bed, Amanda saw the alarmed look in mother's eyes and ran from the room crying. She refused easy comfort, was ready to bear her moral burden all the way to her grave.

My father didn't talk about Indians or arrowheads or anything that might lead to images of the Grand Canyon. My sister dropped her childhood friends and started hanging out with a tougher, more rebellious Goth group who smoked pot and wore black all the time. My parents were at wits end and made Amanda see a therapist. I don't know what they talked about but I know it had nothing to do with our summer vacation. My sister said the therapist was a doofus.

I was forgotten, which I didn't mind, because it gave me time to sort things out in my own way. We all dealt with the tragedy in our own

ways. Amanda never touched a camera again. But I found my way into the mystery of photography and have spent most of my adult life teaching anthropology. I have tried to help students see other world-views. Taking pictures is risky business. Aboriginal people in Australia and Hopi Indians in Arizona feel camera's steal souls, that a likeness holds power over the original entity. Periodically I have wondered if Amanda and the Japanese photographer had inadvertently awakened an angry primal force that created havoc on the overlook that particular day.

By fifteen Amanda had a several boyfriends none of whom my parents knew much about. That fall my mother dyed her hair red and gained twenty pounds. I noticed she was drinking more then dinner wine, but no one said anything. No one could say anything because it would make us remember the snapshot of the Grand Canyon. Amanda failed all of her subjects except gym. But then, no one ever failed gym. Mother had taken up pie baking and cigarette smoking. She made pies every night for months. Sometimes we just ate pie as she had forgotten to make the rest of the meal. Father said our mother was trying to comfort us in the only way she knew how. Even now whenever I see a slice of apple pie I become anxious and my palms sweat. I wonder if there is a name for such a phobia?

Amanda stopped menstruating in the middle of her fifteenth year and dropped out of high school. There were long talks in the kitchen. My father thought abortion was the only solution. " She's just a child herself!" he emphasized when my mother protested on religious and psychological grounds. Doors slammed shut in my parents' hearts.

I remained invisible and almost safe. I felt that if no one noticed me nothing bad could happen to me.

The baby had no particular father as far as we knew. But when she was born we all recognized the slightly oriental almond -shaped eyes and her jet-black hair. My sister and I are quite fair and have blue eyes. Amanda named the baby Akiko and brought her home and installed the child in her bedroom as if she were a stuffed toy.

Strangely, we all slept better once the baby was in the house. Akiko was an unusually quiet baby who hardly uttered a peep. In time Amanda

became a peaceful, attentive mother and gradually we all fell in love with Akiko.

One night when we were older and I was going away to college, Amanda confessed that she had the baby so that she could give it to the Asian father from the Grand Canyon, as a form of atonement, but now she knew that would never happen. I saw that Akiko was providing my sister with a reason to go on living.

It was I who secretly developed the fatal roll of film in Amanda's Kodak. In a box at the back of my closet there is a snapshot of an inadvertently seized split second of a sequence of sudden movements that ended in tragedy, a blurry image of a small pink baseball cap floating against a sky of cloudless blue. I have wondered what was captured by the man's camera, a split second of eternity or his wife's soul?

Part Two: Mihoko's Story

My husband was a good man but a bad photographer.

We were married for three years and I was studying architecture. He worked for his uncle in the family business, Sakamoto Surgical Instruments and Hospital Supplies. He worked long hours and was home only to sleep and change his clothes. I did not complain as we lived better and had more than most people, more than my family. My mother was pleased that I had made such a successful marriage. She admired my husband's family and she liked the gifts I brought home whenever Hiro and I visited. She said I was a good daughter in all ways but one: I had not honored my parents with a grandchild.

"Not yet, dear Mother" I said. "I want to finish my studies and learn more English first."

"Why do you want to work when you have a rich husband? I wish I had a rich husband and did not have to go to work and then come home and work some more."

I said nothing. What could I say that would make any sense to my mother who wanted only the best for me? How could I tell her I wanted to work because I liked fabricating buildings, homes for real people to live in and feel peace and harmony? It wasn't that I didn't want a baby; I didn't want one just yet. I wanted some time to be myself before I became a mother. I could not say this to my parents, as they would certainly think I was a selfish girl who was developing too modern an outlook. I did not want to disappoint them or dishonor the family, so I said nothing and hoped my mother would find something else to fret about.

Hiro skillfully sidestepped my mother's pointed references to grandchildren. He had the ability to blend in when he didn't want to be noticed. His talent at invisibility gave him freedom from prying questions, at least from my side of the family. His family was another matter entirely. I thought the Sakamotos understood that I wanted to work for a few years before we had children. I assumed the Sakamotos would support my desire to have my own career as they valued success in business and were more worldly than my parents. This was naive of me because the Sakamotos expected a male child and they also assumed that I would do everything necessary to help my husband's career. My own interests or desires were not of their concern.

This delicately unbalanced family predicament was further complicated when Hiro's uncle promoted his favorite nephew to be the Director of the Hospital Instruments manufacturing division in Phoenix, Arizona. The medical field was expanding to include digital and computerized medical equipment and the Sakamoto Company was eager to get in on the new market needs. Technology was the future and Hiro was young and had computer skills. He was not shy and seemed to understand the Western way of thinking. Most of all he could be trusted.

Hiro's father never considered that we might not want to move to Phoenix, Arizona. Whatever was good for Sakamoto Instruments was what came first in the Sakamoto family. No one questioned it. Hiro thanked his uncle and his father for the honor and trust they were placing in him and we moved to Arizona. My English skills were not good enough to attend Arizona State University School of Architecture and most of my Kyoto University credits were not transferable.

So, I became pregnant.

We moved into Mountain View Estates, a sub-division of newly built houses that sprawled over the harsh desert. The sales representative, a friendly blond woman in a white linen pants suit enumerated the benefits of living in a planned, exclusive community: tennis courts, jogging paths, horse trails and a community gym, plus surveillance cameras and around the clock security staff that patrolled the estates in electric golf carts. There were four house designs: The Santa Fe, Windsor Hall, Country Home and Desert Pueblo. Each had a pool while a Jacuzzi was optional. Everyone spoke about the beautiful natural environment complete with golf course. I did not see how a golf course that required enormous amounts of water to be kept green was natural in a desert. Only joggers and workman were seen on the streets. Everyone else was encased in his air-conditioned car or house. They emerged in the early evening and swam in their glowing turquoise pools and felt proud of their season-less life style. On the hottest nights in Phoenix I dreamt of snow falling on the trees in Kyoto and woke up crying in the empty bedroom; Hiro was at work by seven a.m.

I was pregnant and lonely.

Hiro liked basketball and went to evening games with his hospital associates at the air-conditioned arena in Phoenix. I went to the gym just to see other people. The only place I saw women working was on exercise machines. They looked bored and stared blankly at the digitized information on their treadmills. No one ever worked in their gardens except the Mexican yard workers who showed day passes when entering our gated hillside estates.

Every evening the grass watered itself with the help of automated spigots that raised their heads like cobras and spat out sharp streams, while twisting from left to right in a precise programmed motion. This mechanical magic show fascinated me almost as much as the automatic ice machine that spat ice cubes into a glass box in our refrigerator door. There wasn't much for me to do in the house. So I drove from one air-conditioned mall to another and bought things I put in the closet forgetting to open them. Hiro was happy and patted my stomach as if it were a puppy. He hoped the baby would be a boy. So did I, as I did not like morning sickness and swollen ankles.

In the cool morning calm I liked sitting and listening to the cooing doves with my baby in my belly and wondering whose soul was coming into this

world. Whenever the baby kicked I was amazed by the fact that I had become two people in one body. It felt as if I had transformed into some kind of hybrid creature straight out of my grandmother's *Kaidan* ghost stories.

I pined for my childhood house in Kyoto. I remembered the wooden shed where my mother dried herbs and curing grasses for teas and ointments and where my grandmother spoke to spirits that had come back to the earth, restless souls which sought attention from the living. I remember Odon, the festival for deceased ancestors who returned once a year in the seventh lunar month to be with the living. My family took their ancestors seriously and put on a good show for the unearthly visitors. Favorite foods were prepared and left out as offerings and appeasements. In our neighborhood the *Bon Odori*, dance of joy, was always performed, and my grandmother reminded us children of the sacrifices and good works of her parents and grandparents. We looked forward to the dance performance and the costumes, but we never sat in the front row seats, as we knew they were reserved for the *gaki*, whom we did not want to displease.

My mother no longer believed that actual ghosts returned but looked forward to the family reuniting because she missed her brother who lived in Nagasaki. It was during my first *Bon* festival that I saw and spoke to an ancestral ghost. She was dressed in a white kimono and she seemed to be floating above the grass. She had no legs, but possessed a very long neck, she danced around me gesturing insistently for something to eat or drink. I ran into the house and returned with my grandmother who stopped in the middle of her trot to keep up with me and stood quite still, breathing heavily. "That is a hungry ghost who desires odious food but has no mouth to eat with. This is a being who is suffering for her past greedy nature".

Death like birth is a transformation of body and soul from one state to another. Why are we part of this inscrutable mystery? Why are we cast, vulnerable and utterly dependent, into a dangerous and beautiful world? Why do we suffer life and then suffer death? The sheer mystery of

existence plagued me. Hiro and I had stopped practicing our religion in our effort to be secular and modern.

I thought about reincarnation and about how our souls return again and again for numerous life times. I yearned to know my life's purpose as I felt like a leaf on the wind. One of the younger wives of my husband's associates invited me to her yoga class. That led to a non-denominational meditation group, which took forty-five minutes to drive to. After a month I started practicing meditation on my own and came to like the time I spent inside my head but out of my body.

I disliked returning to the 'monkey mind' of my everyday existence. In my sixth month of pregnancy I stopped going out, I stopped shopping, I no longer worked out at the gym and the few women friends who had taken a slight interest in me ceased calling. I spent my mornings on my cushion meditating, afterwards I stretched and practiced yoga postures, following diagrams from *Mothers To Be*, then ate some raw vegetables. I couldn't bear to cook them. I apologized before I bit into an apple or chomped on a carrot. It became impossible to slice a tomato because I could hear it scream. I became acutely aware of every tiny voice residing in my sparse desert garden. I listened to the thoughts of birds and lizards and felt the slither of a snake across the cool grass as if it were my own skin. The world had entered me. I was part of every living thing. This was both blissful and distressing.

Sometimes, I would awaken in the cool darkness of the desert night and sense the gnawing hunger in the coyote's belly and then the panic in the unfortunate prey's skin as the predator did what he must. I tried to explain this hyper consciousness to Hiro who had no idea of what to say or do.

He said I could go back to Kyoto and visit my family after the baby was born. I think he thought my mystical experiences were signs of insanity. He looked worried and stopped playing golf on weekends. His friends advised him to spend more time with his family. They told him some pregnant women are overly sensitive and that after the baby was born everything would be fine. Americans are relentlessly cheerful and optimistic. Sad people are sent to spirit doctors called psychologists. Everyone tries to be happier than they are.

Hiro became very solicitous and I would have been pleased if he had shown me this kind of attention earlier. Now I found having him around watching me annoying. It was worse then when he was working because I could not enjoy a meal with him. I could not watch Hiro chew meat or slice fish for the grill. I left the room when he prepared dinner and pushed chunks of dead animal flesh and wounded vegetables from one side of my plate to the other when we sat across from each other at the long glass table. "You are not eating. Don't you like fish anymore? Would you like something else?" I dared not tell him that there was nothing I could eat without guilt or revulsion. He would send me to a doctor who would send me to another doctor and I would have to answer questions I did not want to answer. One day I discovered a jar of Gerber's baby food in the cupboard. I remembered buying it when I first became pregnant because I wanted to taste commercial baby food. The jar of peaches was the only thing that I could swallow with out nausea overcoming me.

When Hiro saw me eating baby food he laughed and asked if I were getting the baby ready for American food? I giggled and said that if our son was going to live in this fast food culture he might as well get started. Hiro didn't like my reply but he didn't know what else to say so he left the room and turned on the TV. I made micro -waved popcorn and thought I would be all right as popcorn didn't taste like real corn but like something invented. In the middle of *High Plains Drifter*, the salty, puffy kernels felt like pregnant seeds in my fingers. I vomited all over the coffee table. Hiro wiped up the mess and sent me to bed. He stayed on the sofa watching the movie to its conclusion. When he came to bed he told me that the Clint Eastwood character was a ghost who was getting even with the living cowboys who had whipped him to death in a previous life. "It is not so different from our Samurai warrior tales. Stories about the revenge of a ' hungry ghost' frightened me when I was a boy but I always looked forward to the next one." He laughed at the memory and suddenly I loved him so much because we shared the same Japanese past.

Akiko was born in the Year of the Tiger on the morning of July 4th. Even though I knew that the fireworks exploding in the night sky outside my twelfth floor hospital window were part of American Independence Day celebrations. I told my newborn daughter, they were in honor of her arrival. Hiro was so tired that he slept in the chair beside my bed and

gently snored. I was sorry he did not see the beautiful bursts of color spray like light from God's invisible hands.

We named the baby Akiko after Hiro's grandmother and never discussed that she was not the boy Hiro had wanted. From the beginning she was a quiet baby, who watched and listened intently like a tiny scholar. My husband held her and marveled at her sheer existence. But as soon as we were back in our air-conditioned house the phone rang and rang for Hiro and pretty soon he was going to meetings, working late, meeting clients for drinks or golf. I realized it would always be this way, whether we lived in America or Japan.

When Akiko was five months old, I asked Hiro for a family weekend with out clients, without his associates. He took note of my request and realized he should honor it. I was pleased when he suggested a trip to the Grand Canyon. It seemed a logical choice as we were only a few hours away but had never gone before. Unlike myself, Hiro needs something to do when he is relaxing. Photography had become his new hobby. He bought the best equipment and spent hours reading manuals and booklets. I was looking forward to being outdoors in clean air and smelling pine trees.

We drove to an overlook that was supposed to have one of the best viewing sites. Hiro was like a little boy who could not wait to look so he was the first to reach the railed overlook. I felt shy, as there were people already on the site, an American family by the sound of them. Like us they were tourists with camera and binoculars. Akkiko was sleepy but I told her to stay awake, as she was about to see the Grand Canyon. Secretly I thought she should be seeing Mount Fuji first.

When I got to the railing and looked over I could not breathe. It was so vast and beguilingly still. There was only the whisper of wind rustling treetops. I wanted to look and look, but Hiro was very excited and eager to take a picture. He was directing me this way and that way. I leaned on the railing so that he would have to adjust himself to my position. The American girl was also photographing, and the two of them moved back and forth like celestial chess pieces.

Hiro was intent on getting his shot and was busy composing a timeless masterpiece. He motioned for me to hoist myself onto the iron railing. I

did as he directed, watching him fiddle with the lens and the light meter. He was so intent on his task that he did not sense the American girl behind him. Suddenly, an unearthly scream shot through the air and startled me. I jerked backwards just a little but it was enough for me to lose my uneasy balance.

I tumbled into air and surprisingly... I felt joy as that endless space opened its arms and welcomed me. I heard my husband shout, Akiko! And realized I was still holding her. We bounced off an outcrop of rocks, then fell past tree branches and orange stones until there was nothing left, except a deep relief that it was finally over. My last awareness was that my husband had called out our daughter's name, not mine.

I don't mind being dead. It is something I had unknowingly yearned for. Living demands so much from us. I don't think I was cut out for it. I like this mutable gray world but I don't want to be a *yurei* forever. My sudden and un-ceremonial death has left me an unsettled and insubstantial ghost floating about transparent like smoke or mist on a lonely overlook in Arizona. I hope my husband and my parents will perform a proper ceremony for me so that I can detach from this earthly trap and my *reikon* or soul can reunite with my ancestors

I have prayed ceaselessly for Akiko's soul to return to the living as quickly as possible. She needed more time to live out her karma. My prayers have been answered. The American girl loves her very much and Akkiko is healing the wound in Amanda's heart. Her family needs Akkiko in order to understand the *obake* aspect of life. Nothing is stable, everything is mutable.

Hiro has left the family business and returned to Japan. He lives alone in a fishing village below a venerable Buddhist monastery. Someday he will make the climb up the mountain where peace awaits him.

I am no longer angry with Hiro. He was just a man stumbling through his life asleep until a silly girl's scream awakened him. Hiro never developed the film in his Nikon. It is in a drawer in his uncle's house beside the barely-used camera. Perhaps, someone will eventually process the roll and they will have an image of the last 1/250th slice of a second of my life preserved on three-by-five-inch glossy paper, which, ironically, will last longer than I had lived.

Part 3:

Grand Canyon story

Once upon a time, not so long ago in geological time I was considered terrifying, a place where the sublime and the utter unknown resided. A place where wildness ruled and man was only one of many creatures that inhabited this sacred land. Anazzazi people lived in my caves, grew maize, beans on my forest floor and climbed my cliff faces and buried their dead in my soft earth. Time was a loose idea that had to do with the sun and the moon. It wasn't sliced up into mechanical minutes, seconds, and hours. The Anazzazi were easy to live with. They respected me as a mother and as an awesome force.

Time passed winds blew, snow fell, and trees stood and then fell or rotted away. The river carved its way deeper and deeper into the earth. It never rested.

The Anazzazi went away. Navahos, Hopis, and all the others came and brought their needs and desires to me. The Europeans came as conquerors or as gold seekers. Then there were the prospectors, the surveyors, the mappers and the geologists followed by Government men and entrepreneurs who recognized that a lot of money could be made from my scenery. I became the Grand Canyon national park. Rangers were established to monitor the -----acres of spectacular scenery. Tourists came to see for themselves what all the fuss was about. Hotels owners and workers and camp ground crews were installed to aide the hikers and scenic viewers, picture takers, travel writers, day- trippers and the... jumpers.

“Scenery is no scenery without the right cultural baggage”, wrote ----- Shepard. And he had a point. I may be here in all my astounding on going actuality, but it is the human mind that constructs my worth. It is humans who feel sublime fear and awe. It is they who liken me to their version of God. I have inspired, stunned, terrified and brought people to their knees babbling prayers. It is a two -way exchange. The

philosophers have had a go on understanding me by linking me to the idea of the sublime. For Burke the sublime was terror -- the possibility of danger with no immediate harm. For Kant the sublime was infinitude -- the inability to grasp the immeasurable combined with the awareness of one's inability to grasp it.

The explorers, the romantics, the naturalists, the scientists, the painters and the photographers have come to interpret me. They all try in their own way to take me away to their world as an image. They valiantly and foolishly attempt to capture me in images of their own making. They all want to be creators, of one kind or another. Most don't know how to be still and to want nothing. Too much beauty and too much silence both attract and repel my visitors. They think that climbing me or hiking me will improve them as individuals. I am something they feel they must master or conquer in whatever way possible. They consider me to be an excellent example of nature they like that I am here, protected from themselves and their insatiable greed. They have constructed platforms on precipices in this museum of trees and rocks that allows viewers to gaze at nature, as if it were a landscape painting made by God for tourist trade.

Most don't know how to be still and to want nothing.

I have long been number one on the list of the seven natural wonders of the world. Recently, I have over taken the Golden Gate Bridge as number one choice for suicidal jumpers. Cultural notions enter into this infamous honor. Movies, books, newspaper stories, all play a role in a suicidal person's location choice. Some want to enter into a grand vision of supernatural nature, others want the excitement and glamour of a renowned spot, famous the world over, to be part of their epitaph.

Several men and one woman planned for months to jump into my eternity. One tormented man took the perfect swan -song dive off Sublime overview while another drove his car off my South Rim. They yearn to end their human pain in my arms. Others find ways of stumbling, swooning, falling, or just dropping into my depths.

They come to me with their needs, and as Mother, I welcome them all.

Friday, January 02, 2009

Grand Canyon had the most suicides

Three suicides last year were enough to put Grand Canyon National Park [*right, credit NPS*] at the top of the list, according to a National Park Service report. Saguaro National Park listed one. In 2007, there were 26 suicides or probable suicides in the parks. Park Service search-and-rescue records show 18 suicides in 2006, 18 in 2005 and 16 in 2004. Grand Canyon averages two suicides per year.

I've read speculations that the beauty and solitude of the parks are attractive to suicides or is it like Golden Gate Bridge - dramatic and prominent? Is the big increase in numbers in 2008 over previous years a trend, or perhaps an anomaly related to the economic turmoil?

At 11:53 AM