

They were red-rock shelves that looked like they were sliced away and neatly tiered by an enormous x-acto knife in an ambitious, yet unsteady hand. The wall of red stood between me and the creek I thought I could hear rushing by on the other side.

“I could hike up and over,” I thought out loud.

White and grey birds above seemed to mock my thinking. They flitted and chirped as they scavenged for food on the upper levels. I had to accept that I was lost and the reality that it would be dark in a few hours. I needed to get up on top and look out on all sides to get my bearings.

Why had I so irresponsibly left camp on my own? And how had I walked so far, so fast, and so unconsciously as to get so lost? Anger mixed with jealousy, that’s how! It hurt to see my husband so taken with another woman. It hurt to know that he was on the verge of breaking his promises to me again.

My hiking shoes (so dubbed because I wore them out with sporadic jaunts on the treadmill), were loose on my feet and uneven bunions made it difficult to walk much further.

“It won’t be too bad,” I said. “It will take 10-15 minutes tops.”

I looked for the natural incline that would be my on-ramp and started to ascend. Slippery shale shavings made every step a bit of a slider, which I immediately adjusted for, setting each foot down and checking for grip before lifting the other one.

On the first tier, I tied my jacket around my waist and moved my sunglasses up to my hair. I looked for the next natural ledge and plotted my steps and holds to the next landing.

Stepping carefully and firmly, I arrived without much trouble. I zig-zagged across the cold, hard flint-like face and started to feel like I could do anything. The next little platform was just out of reach. But I could see a path that would work if I removed a few rocks and used their places to hold on.

I was at least half-way to the top when it started to rain. Within minutes the water was washing over the top of the entire rock mountain and coming at me in a thick sheet. A natural waterfall had quickly developed on what had to be a flat surface above. Water was pouring rapturously down its face. It poured down my face as well.

I tried to make it to the next level up and over to the left. There, the angle of the platform was less obliterated by the wall of rushing water. Immediately, I knew I had no traction on the wet rock. I crouched down, tucked my face away from the blanket of water that threatened to throw me straight to the ground.

I held on and waited.

I don't know how long the flashflood lasted, but when I finally felt the sunshine on my wet clothing I was grateful and relieved.

I thought I heard some voices a ways away.

I yelled, "Hello? Can you hear me?" "Is there anyone there?"

No response.

As if to answer me, a huge rock broke away and came blasting down the rock mountain. It passed me on the left and fell and fell and fell, then landed in a splash. I looked up and listened to see if there were more break-aways but none came.

I considered going back down.

"And then what?" I argued with myself.

I would have to walk around the peninsula, which could be many miles on the edge of a marshland leading me nowhere. Or, I could try and cut through tangled bushes and trees to find our campground, which had to be a long-distance away and I did not know in what direction.

I panicked. I can't go up, can't go down, and no one knows I am here.

It is getting dark and I am soaking wet.

What was I thinking when I left camp?

The kids are probably all returning now, to tell their adventure stories of the day and to eat everything in camp.

“Let’s see, I left camp and walked south, crossed Cherry Creek, and walked a while—completely lost in thought,” I admitted to myself.

“Yes, but did you take the right fork or the left fork?” I asked in a game-show-host voice.

I had been up the right fork before, several times, and suspected that this unknown scenery must be left fork territory. They will never know to look for me here.

I got colder as I sat still and realized that the best thing I could do was to keep moving. I figured that no one would ever see me and my neutral clothing and blonde hair against this rock of reflecting color and texture.

As I worked my way up one more tier, I thought about my predicament and the feelings that sent me running down the road, away from camp. My husband had seemed preoccupied during this trip. Oh, but he was attentive to the long brown-haired friend of mine camping right next to us. JoAnn was my friend, and her husband Bill was my husband’s friend. But today, JoAnn and Steve were focused on each other, and Bill and I sat looking on in disbelief. She was getting him new sodas and wanted him to try red licorice over at her camp table. She asked him to play poker with her, and now she asked him to take her for a ride on his new 4-wheeler. I guess I had given my consent for all of us to be “closer,” when I failed to draw boundaries right up front. In fact, I softened the boundaries by going along with a few practical jokes—anything for a laugh!

Steve wanted to get back at Bill for embarrassing him at his work with a prank call. Bill worked at a bank, and—in the name of a revenge prank on Steve’s behalf--I randomly sent him a dozen roses with a card that said, “Thanks for last night!” JoAnn was in on it and acted suspicious and jealous when he called to tell her about it. It was all in fun.

But, today, I had returned to camp just as they went off down the trail. JoAnn was on his 4-wheeler behind Steve and hanging on affectionately. Her long, brown hair was flying in the wind as he burned around the corner.

I thought about following along with them but got a sick feeling in the pit of my stomach. I started walking in the opposite direction, just to catch my breath, and I walked faster and faster as I thought about what was happening.

We had been through this before. Their eyes will meet serendipitously, and they will flirt and play in front of everyone. He will try to be angry at me for every little thing. Finally, when I ask what is really going on, out comes denial. Our lives will be volatile for weeks and then, when he

loses interest, he'll tell me bits of truth, justify his actions (somehow it will be my fault), and then when I say I'm leaving, he'll apologize, promise to change, and beg me to stay.

Another boulder fell to the ground, breaking into pieces as it landed. I angled my body and propelled myself to the next shelf as quickly as I could. –Just a few more treacherous levels to go. I clung to the wall with my hands and took the next brave step up. I grabbed a bit higher than I needed to, and the protruding edge I tried to grip came off in my hand. The shale seemed to be crumblier after it got wet. A flush of small rocks fell and I dropped the handful of crumble that I held. As I reached to secure another spot, my foot slipped and my “hiking shoe” on my painful “bunionated foot” fell into a crevasse and locked in place.

Tears welled up in my eyes, but I was not about to give in to another challenge—to feeling stuck. I moved my attention to my swelling foot. I could probably slip it out of the shoe and leave it there, but what then? There were so many briars and stickers on the ground that I would not be able to walk anywhere without them. A few unwelcome tears leaked from my eyes and spilled down my face, then stopped as I told myself to find a solution.

Flat against the wall, I could not bend enough to use my hand to pull my foot out. The next landing was elusive, but I needed to go for it or hang there until morning. It was getting dark so quickly and I was uncomfortably cold. There were no good options.

“Please, God,” I ventured. “Please help me. I don’t know what to do. Please show me the way. I must find a path out of here. My kids will be getting worried. I need to go take care of them. They still need me for a while. “

I twisted my foot and felt pain in the ankle. I flexed my toes to hold on to the shoe and pulled from every angle. The shoe did not budge. I supposed that if I moved one hand, slowly along the wall, out and down, I might be able to get ahold of the loop on the shoelace. Maybe I could pull on it at the same time and get enough inertia to pull it out. I slithered a bit to the left, dug my fingers into the rocks, and released one hand. I pulled lightly on the lace. I had to reposition the rest of my body several times to get enough leverage. But I was finally able to pull the lace hard enough and with my toes gripping the top of the shoe, I was able to create just the right angle and pull it out. As the shoe popped free, my whole body flopped away from the rock wall--just long enough to forcefully restart my heart.

My fingernails were quickly invested in solid rock. When my heart stopped pounding, I moved slowly, step by step, grip by grip, until I reached a little landing with a small bush growing out of the rock. Here I stopped and considered spending the night in this first-friendly place. I sat down,

dangling my legs, and breathing a sigh. It was a beautiful sight from my vantage point. I could see a few 4-wheelers off in the distance and smoke from a couple of far-off campfires and the setting sun in its colorful display.

Why can't he be faithful, I pondered. Will it always be this way? Ironically, I guess I'll have to brace myself for another in-your-face desert waterfall—and there I'll be, clinging to the face of a red-shale mountain, stuck--fingernails dug in, waiting for the storm of his illicit passion to clear so the sun can come out.

I began moving toward the top to make my final ascent.

Mabey it is me. I'm not exciting enough--oh, but I could be. As I inched my way up to the top of the wall, I suddenly felt empowered.

"I'll find a way to get and keep his attention," I said out loud.

Once on top, I found a crimson rock plateau that stretched for miles. The creek was not there, but a breeze blew through the canyon, rustling trees and glancing off the red rock wall. I could see the lights from a gas station in town, barely in sight as the setting sun colored the horizon in reds and purples. The sky was giving way to a clear night, and the stars looked like friendly spirits reaching out to me.

The marquee was microscopic, but after a few minutes, I knew which direction I had to go to find camp. I started walking with the starlight showing the way. I walked the better part of an hour before taking a break.

I stopped to rest my aching feet. When my breathing slowed, I listened. It was spine-chilling, not knowing if a wild animal was out there or a human predator. --I just wanted to make dinner for the kids.

A four-wheeler was up ahead, and I could tell from his lights he was scooping a bowl on the sandy mountain. As I got closer, I called out, but they could not hear me.

I walked on top of the ridge as much as possible. My feet were throbbing now so I pulled off my collapsing shoes. I wondered if I should even bring them along. I tied their laces together and threw them over my shoulder. I felt the stickers and burrs attacking my feet as I walked, but it didn't seem to matter much as I followed a trail in the soft sand.

As I approached the bowl, I had an ominous feeling. If this was not a nice guy out there, (and right now I doubted there were many), what could happen? Should I go way around, using the other ridge, or should I just hurry and cut through.

Just then, a 4-wheeler got louder as it pulled up on the ridge I had just crossed on the left side of me. The rider was waving his arm as he headed toward me.

“Bill?” I asked as he approached.

“Roxy?” he asked. “We’ve all been out looking for you. Are you ok?”

“Yea,” I said, “just cold and tired.”

“Well, hop on,” he commanded. I slipped on my shoes and tucked in the laces, then leaned on Bill’s back and shoulder as he took control.

I was so tired and grateful. We hurried back to camp, driving another six miles.

“How did you get clear over by the cliffs,” he asked as we unloaded.

“I’m not sure,” was all I could say.

Bill and I became good friends on that trip, comrades in unspoken grief. I knew that I could safely lean on him, even flirt with him to get Steve’s attention, because Bill loved JoAnn more than life itself, and he knew that I was so in love with Steve.

We hid our hurt in a cloud of dirt as we went riding the next day before anyone else was even up. As we spun our wheels around every bend, it almost felt like we were doing something that would make a difference—like upsetting the balance of power.

The trail looked different in the daylight, with more twists and turns, yet it was easier to navigate. We rode aggressively to the fork in the road near Cherry Creek. We joked about the grand and determinative decision to go east or west, and Bill teased me about remembering which path I had chosen.