

Wide Canyon, A love Story

By Ken Sims

Prologue:

Any story I write that features my wife Wendy ... is just somehow a love story. ...Even those that are not altogether happy...

Wide Canyon:

I awakened early on the morning of Sunday, February 19, 2006. With nothing more pressing to do, so I got on the computer and resumed my efforts to chart a course over the Little San Bernardino Mountains from our home in Sky Valley (on the South) through Joshua Tree National Park. I say, "resumed" because since moving here in 2002 I have wanted to do that and had made at least a superficial effort to plot it out on a variety of occasions. But this time it was different: I actually came up with something that looked plausible ... on paper, that is. Between aerial photos from the USGS site and my topo program, I had printed out a route and noted the coordinates of important/tricky canyon junctions that were apparent.

By the time Wendy was up and moving, I was quite excited and told her that I wanted to put it to the test. As I recall it, she was all for it (to my surprise because I thought it was a bit of a stretch to ask of her) and played an important role. She would pick me up on the North side in the evening. Wendy drove me up Aqueduct to the gate and I was on my way around noon.

Things were going very well for a long, long way. I was keeping a good pace, I had a lot of confidence that I was on my route and above all it was a lovely scene. Deep canyons, beautiful rock, quietude, some Joshua trees ... then some pinon pine and juniper. I'd even found a spring with running water. Best of all I saw no one and the only sign I saw of folks appeared very old indeed. It was everything I'd only dreamed of for four years. I mean, I just walked into this magical canyon from my own backyard! It was Sunday and for the first time in a long time, I was in church. This is God's country.

... More zigs in the canyon. More dramatic sights. More zags ...

..About four or five hours into the hike the terrain became more rugged and complicated. Clearly this was where the real climb to the crest would begin. But like I said it was complicated too. Here there were many narrow canyons and steep ridges. Many of the canyons quickly led to vertical, dry waterfalls that I didn't want to climb. The ridges were equally frightening (as they should be for a hiker out on his own). Add to that the sheer number of these features. Neither my maps nor my aerial photos showed enough detail for me to anticipate these. I couldn't specifically find the route I'd planned and everywhere I turned I was thwarted by the rugged terrain – usually after 15-30 minutes of investment up a canyon or ridge that ultimately failed me.

To understate it, I wasn't making good time any longer. I was making no actual forward progress at all. AND, I was exhausting myself in these fruitless efforts to do so. I started to panic. It was getting closer to the time when Wendy would be on her way to come pick me up; no cell phone reception and no way forward. But I did have some things going for me: I wasn't lost – I knew how to get home; I had substantial snacks and a couple liters of water. On the last of these forays I got terrible, crippling leg cramps and crashed -- I lost my footing on a steep, sandy/gravelly slope. No injury – I rested. I was still panicked ... even more so, I had awful nausea. I am a worrier by my nature (it's practically a hobby), but this was different. I wasn't going to make my rendezvous and I knew it.

We do almost everything together, Wendy and I ... we have since we were married. She is going to be absolutely beside herself. This can't be happening. I'm fine, just tired – it's her situation that is so completely awful and I can't do anything to help her. The fact is that if I was a bachelor and had made no arrangements to get home – that I'd hitch a ride – this would be a bit scary (maybe spending a night in the canyon that I had specifically intended not to do) but this was different – Wendy loves me and is expecting me to meet her at the campground which I know isn't far as a crow flies, but I don't have wings to carry me over this ridiculous terrain. She will arrive at the campground to pick me up, I won't be there and she'll assume the absolute worst – I would. Oh my god!

Please, God, for Wendy's sake help me out here. ...Deep breaths, first from exertion, then from nausea ... finally by discipline. ...I rested. After a short while I started to collect myself.

I resolved to head back home – arriving home a day late (and at the wrong destination) would be better than dead at the bottom of a cliff for eternity. Of course, the sun sets early this time of year, especially in these narrow, deep, north-south running canyons so I'd spend a night in the canyon. Wendy would be calling out the search parties ... she'd probably never let me hike again. ...And I can't blame her. But we'll both survive and time will heal us.

Relief. What a difference a good, firm decision about a course of action can make. At this time I knew I'd miss my rendezvous and spend the night in the canyon. I was truly resolved to that. That gave me a sense of having some time – I was less desperate. I realized that I might still catch Wendy at home if I could find some high ground with cellular reception. ...Here's the key, ANY HIGH GROUND, not just high ground towards my destination. I found it! The reception was very poor (and I was scared that it would be just enough to make things even worse for her), but after a couple of halting and interrupted conversations, she understood that I would not be making the rendezvous, but that I was fine and heading back home the way I came ... probably arriving home the next morning.

Total relief! OK, I was tired and sore already, but now all I had to worry about was getting myself home safely. I knew the route, there was nothing (but distance and fatigue) making that route a challenge. I'd given Wendy a reasonable expectation for my arrival home. She'll be fine. ...Me too.

There is an evening service in this church too. It's different.

Epilogue:

I ended up walking out of the canyon late that same night. Wendy wasn't able to sleep so was still awake when I called her to let her know I'd made it out.

I'd had a GPS unit on that hike. Wendy and I made several trips to Black Rock to attempt to connect East Wide Canyon to the trails from Black Rock campground. I think it was on the third such attempt that we succeeded – we reached a point that I had reached that late afternoon. What a thrill!

About a year after that fateful day, my Dad – then 72 years old – and his friend (I think a touch older) navigated the entire route from North to South. We were rewarded at one point (a place I call Pyramid Mtn) with herds of big horn sheep on the ridges on both sides of the canyon – wow!

...Since then Wendy and I have hiked the route once or twice a year. On our most recent passage we provided navigational leadership to the Sky Valley Hiking Club.

...Since then “The Poet-Broker” of Los Angeles, Edward Rosenthal, became horribly lost in the same canyon (though he was not attempting to hike the canyon) in late Sept. of 2010. He was rescued alive after 6 days in the wilderness about 3.2 miles up the canyon from our house. On Oct. 4, 2010 I ventured up the canyon to locate his encampment. His is a truly amazing story. I feel an odd (for me) kinship to him on account of his ordeal in the same canyon. I have communicated with him and hope that one day we'll walk the same sanctuary together. ...Safely!