



Heart of the Mountain *Patricia Brown Davis*

Looking Through the Gates of Heaven

I don't know what you could say about a day in which you have seen four beautiful sunsets. — John Glenn

There are peak experiences in life. If we're lucky, we have some every day. Few people will be as fortunate as John Glenn—to view from space our beloved earth as it turned on its axis.

Often these peak moments come at the end of our day, perhaps because that's when we slow down long enough to recognize them when they appear. We're often surprised to find they only cost us a moment's time and attention. I was lucky enough to have a parent who introduced me to many of those when I was young. I tried to do the same for my family.

One late fall afternoon in the 1940s, Mom and my two siblings and I were all in the kitchen when Dad bounded through the door and said, "Okay, everyone, into the car!" Mom replied, "I need to change my clothes." I had one question, "Where are we going?" Dad fired back, "We don't have time to change clothes. I'm not telling where. It's a surprise."

Out we all went, clamoring, and quickly jumped into the car. Dad shifted gears, put a smile on his face, and off we sped. Mom, of course, was sputtering, "Ellsworth, I don't think these wild goose chases of yours are very funny. What's so important anyway? This is making dinner late. You can't keep expecting us to jump at a moment's notice all of the time." And on and on. Mom's attitude and words rolled off Dad like rain off a new metal roof.

I was a pre-teen, my sister, Ann, ten, and brother, David, four. We'd all secretly aligned ourselves with Dad, so we huddled in the back seat knowing something great was about to happen. But what? Dad had taught us life was something to be engaged in and enjoyed every minute of every day. We lived for his energy and spontaneity.

Down the road we went, a turn here, and another one there, all the while climbing higher up a nearby mountain—civilization left behind. Driving on an old dirt road, we drove through a thick, dark forest, coming out the other side into a huge bright field of grass. We were on top. You could see mountains for miles. There were just the mountains, the sky, the sun, a few clouds, and this field.

Dad pulled over to the edge of the road and turned off the motor. He walked straight back to the trunk, opened it, and pulled out two bags—one of soda and another of beer. He reached in again and retrieved the blanket, which was always there. "Follow me," he said. We all went marching behind him as he walked across the field. He spread out the blanket and motioned for us to sit down on it.

Dad opened the drinks for us and said, "Okay! The show's about to begin." We had no doubt he spoke the truth. But what? We watched his eyes to see if we could tell what he meant. Dad just grinned, didn't say a word, lay back on the blanket, and surrendered to the joy.



Then he started to talk about his day's work with Mom. Ann, David, and I tried to guess what the show was going to be. The day was waning. We even talked about our stomachs as they began to growl. Still, we didn't see an animal or other people.

Then we saw it—the birth of a sumptuous saffron sunset! A bright citron sunshine turned to apricot, then wild tangerine turned to peach, and on into salmons and watermelon reds. The colors went slowly from diffused to brilliant. Like the framing of a stage's great proscenium, on the periphery were the multi-colored leaves of deciduous trees—all reflecting back, adding to the drama. All the while Dad talked about the colors and how they reminded him of sunflowers, my sister's dress, cantaloupes, dahlias, Uncle Bert's barn, burgundy wine, and finally Grandma's dark blue velvet dress.

As the sun set, we saw echoes of its radiance on the edges of the clouds—pinks, mauves, lavenders, and, as the light receded, into blues and finally indigo. We all sat quietly, finished our drinks, and inwardly knew we'd witnessed a sacred event—the exquisite death of an autumn sunset. Then dad jumped up and declared, "Okay, let's go have dinner!"

We enjoyed many sunsets with my dad. Ann and I even began to take bets (sometimes before he came home) on which nights we'd again get the word to jump in the car. We could always count on Mom to go along, routine protestations notwithstanding.

I can understand why Sir John Lubbock, a nineteenth-century banker, archeologist, naturalist, and politician, in his book *The Pleasures of Life*, under the section of "The Beauty of Nature," stated that

"Sunsets are so beautiful that they almost seem as if we're looking through the gates of Heaven."

Years later, while listening to an old album by Richard Harris, I was reminded of these jaunts. On an album labeled *Slides* was one cut with the same title. In the background you can hear the click of a slide projector. In between the clicks you can hear Harris, that wonderfully sensuous and silvery Celtic voice, documenting a recent trip. I still remember: *click ...* "And here's a picture of a sunset" ... *click ...* "and here's another sunset" ... *click ...* "and here's another sunset. I know they all look the same, but I know the difference."

In those days, Dad showed us the differences. I travel a lot today. Like Dad and Richard Harris and a lot of camera buffs, I take lots of photos of sunsets. Some of them do look a lot alike, but there are differences. I know, because I feel them differently. They remind me of where I was, who I was with, and all of the stories connected with a particular time. They remind me that there is something far larger than our own lives, there is mystery, dreams to be dreamed, time to be used for contemplation, health to be recovered, and priorities to be set. I must keep remembering to take time to protect my connection with the earth—that, beauty, and family form the foundation of my happiness.

Patricia Brown Davis is a professional musician and a memoirist seeking stories about the local glass factory. Contact her at paid@mountainhomemag.com.