

THE AFTERNOON WALK

by Verne Wheelwright

The afternoon had been very pleasant. Friends from the West Coast were visiting us in Harlingen, and we had taken them to a wildlife refuge on the Rio Grande, not far from our home. The four of us had spent the afternoon walking trails, catching up on old times, and admiring the wildlife. We'd brought binoculars and cameras and had taken lots of pictures of birds, butterflies and each other.

It was a pretty typical early Fall afternoon in the Rio Grande Valley, with temperatures in the mid-nineties, but we had come fairly late in the day, so a breeze from the southeast had come up, carrying cooler air off the river. It was late enough in the day that even though the sun had not quite set, a full moon was already rising, so we all started moving along the trail in the direction of the parking lot.

I lagged a little behind, fascinated by a Green Jay at one of the feeders just off the trail. And I might add, if you don't know what a Green Jay is, take a minute to look up a picture in Google Images, then you'll understand some of my fascination. Anyway. As I watched this bird, my wife and friends walked on, disappearing around a bend in the path, so I started on to catch up, but was again distracted by several hummingbirds, apparently part of the migration already headed south for the winter.

I realized that the sun was starting to set and light was fading, so I resumed my way down the path toward the parking area. I hadn't gone far when I met a lady coming from the other direction. She appeared somehow distressed, and I sensed a feeling of deep sadness. As she approached, I spoke, not really knowing why but I felt she needed help, and I asked "May I help you?"

She kept walking without really looking at me, but I heard her say "Ay, mis hijos!" Although I've lived in the Valley for several years, I still don't speak Spanish very well, but I understood her to say "Oh, my children!" Yet she clearly didn't want my help and she kept walking until she was out of sight behind the tall grasses and the fading light. I walked on down the trail, wondering what I could do. Since she didn't seem to want my help, it certainly didn't make sense to run after her, but what if her children were lost? And it was starting to get dark.

I picked up my pace, hoping to catch up with my wife and friends, also hoping they'd stopped to look at something along the way and weren't standing in the parking lot waiting for me to arrive with the keys to the car! As I neared the end of the path, I saw a park ranger coming; probably checking the trails to be sure everyone was out of the park before darkness. Stopping, I told her about my encounter with the lady who was looking for her children.

The young park ranger hesitated, "Where did you see her?" she asked. "Along this path, near the river. Probably 200 yards or so further on," I answered, pointing in the direction from which I had just come. Again the hesitation. "Was she wearing a white dress?" Realizing the ranger must know the lady I had seen, I smiled and said, "Yes, she was. It was fairly long."

The young park ranger's dark eyes looked troubled and she seemed a little pale. She reached out and took my arm, then started walking with me, slowly, in the direction of the parking lot. "I don't think there is anything we can do to help her this evening," she said gently. I wasn't quite sure what she meant, and asked her. "Your friends are waiting" she said, "so let's talk while we walk, but the fact is, you've just met our resident ghost!"

When I was very young, I heard lots of ghost stories, and was afraid of ghosts because I thought they might harm me. As I grew older, I became less afraid and more curious about the possibility that ghosts might exist, and wondered how I would go about seeing one — but without any risk! As a teen, I read a lot of books about ghosts and other paranormal experiences

By the time I became a grandfather I had become more skeptical. I guessed that ghosts were a possibility, but I felt they were very unlikely to exist. I tried to keep my mind open on the subject, but really gave it very little thought. But, I remembered that when my son had died not too many years ago, I thought that he had spoken to me. Several times. Very clearly. But I attributed that to wishful thinking, because I wanted to hear from him.

So now, I had actually encountered a ghost?

“And what does that mean?” I asked. “Isn’t meeting a ghost a warning of impending death or some terrible event?” She smiled, almost laughed, and replied, “Not in this case. Many of us here in the park have met this woman over the years, and we’re all doing just fine. No ill effects.” Then I asked the obvious question, “Who is she?”

“Well, she’s truly a legend that goes back at least a hundred years. There are a lot of different stories about her, but generally they all boil down to a young woman with small children who has been abandoned by her husband. She eventually realized that no other man would take her in, much less marry and support her, and she had no way to feed her babies. Desperate out of her mind, she threw her babies into the river and watched them drown. Grieving and inconsolable, she eventually died of sorrow and starvation. Now she walks the river looking for her babies.”

Her description of the plight of the woman I had seen was very sympathetic, with no sense of fear or apprehension, but with an acceptance of the unexplainable as just that — unexplainable. By this time, we had arrived at the parking area, and the young ranger said, “I really enjoyed talking with you, and I hope you won’t let any of this worry you,” then with a smile and a wave, she returned to her duties.

When I reached the car, my wife jokingly asked, “Did they send the park rangers out to bring your back?” I replied, “Not exactly, but it’s a long, interesting story. I’ll tell you all about it on the drive home.”

I’ve thought about that day many times since then, and about the two very different young women divided by over a century, yet literally crossing paths in our time. It also made me wonder about incidents over my own lifetime that might have provided opportunities to understand something that I couldn’t. And because I couldn’t, or wouldn’t, understand I missed those opportunities. I won’t again.

My encounter has also caused me to wonder if times have changed that much over the centuries, knowing that in recent years several women in the U.S. have gone to jail or mental institutions for drowning their children or killing them in other ways. Sometimes these acts are malicious, simply to get rid of the children, but other times they appear to be acts of desperation to save the children from the lives that they are in. These women have been or are being punished for their crimes, but none will face a fate like that of the woman I met during a late afternoon walk by the river.