

## Sixteen Feet of Air

It was a long trip to Lake Powell for small children. Eight hours in the van was tough enough for anyone, but for kids prone to car sickness and sibling altercations it was a difficult challenge to say the least. Normally, this was especially true for Elizabeth who always demanded her space, fresh air and a clear view of the highway. Without it she would be the first one using the oversize baggies to help contain her motion sickness until the van came to a complete stop alongside the road.

But this trip was different. She sat quietly in the back of the van – no talking, no fighting, no yelling, no sickness. Mom and I were quite amazed. This was very unusual behavior for our young twelve year old daughter. As a matter of fact, it was so unusual that we were concerned something serious was wrong. Perhaps she had experienced some traumatic, psychological and emotionally scarring event making her seem so out of character. At our first gas stop all the children sprang from the car to stretch their weary legs. All the children that is except for Elizabeth. She sat motionless in the back seat. “Elizabeth”, I asked inquisitively, “are you feeling okay sweetheart”? She looked straight ahead, arms folded across her chest, “My father, do not worry. I will be fine.”

As I peered in my mirror three hours later, Elizabeth was in the same exact position at the rear of the bus with the same exact expression on her face. It seemed the closer we traveled to Lake Powell the more serious this problem became. Mom had a look of horror in her eyes. She held one hand to her mouth and placed the other firmly on my arm. Not wanting to believe her own words she whispered, “Honey, something is wrong. Something is terribly wrong.”

16.73 miles past the Moab exit on Interstate 70, Elizabeth blurted out her first words of the trip. The family jumped at the sudden explosion of noise from the stoned-face, immovable body that by this time in the trip was thought of as just another object in the van. The squeaks and rattles of the van made a lot more noise than Elizabeth. “Stop the van. Stop the van now”, she exclaimed. I thought for sure she was carsick and things were going to erupt any minute. I slammed on the brakes and pulled to the side of the highway as quick as I could.

Elizabeth slowly made her way to the side door. She stepped out into the cool morning air of the Wahobi Desert. What happened next was even more strange behavior than her comportment in the van. She bent down and grabbed a handful of sand. She let it sift through her fingers as the wind gently carried each grain a few feet to the Southwest. She found a Kachina Bush just a few feet away. She inhaled the sweet fragrance of its bright orange blossoms. Then she faced the early morning sun coming up in the East as a large ball of fire. Her hands were outstretched and her head tilted back. She stood still, absorbing the warming rays of the sun. Her lips were slightly moving, mumbling what appeared to be an Indian chant of some sort. Finally, she laid her arms flat across her chest and bent down on one knee and bowed her head.

I studied the customs and rituals of the Indians of this part of the country for several years. I consider myself somewhat of an expert in this field. What I had just witnessed was so similar to the ceremonial preparation of the Apache warrior just prior to “The challenge of Bravery” issued by tribal leaders. Each challenge was extremely dangerous. Many accepted the challenge, but few lived to receive the glory and acknowledgement of superior bravery bestowed only by the Chief. Something was up. Something big was about to happen in the life of this young and courageous girl.

At Lake Powell we completed all our preparations on the houseboat to leave for our predetermined site. Everything was a “go” with the exception of one jet ski. It was malfunctioning. Both Daniel and Michael, two of the most athletic young men in Colorado, could not get the blasted machine to operate properly. I was about ready to leave the machine behind when Elizabeth confronted me. She looked me straight in the eyes and with all the seriousness she could communicate, she said, “Father, I must take the machine. I will meet you at the campsite.” My instinctive answer would have been a flat “no”. But, something within me said this was important to her – she needed this jet ski to accomplish her “test”, her trial of bravery.

As we sputtered the leviathan from its moorings, Elizabeth was racing the jet ski 45 mph through the marina. We stood there in disbelief. The more experienced boys could barely get the thing to idle. Not only was she churning up the designated “no wake” area, but she was hitting the rippling waves of other boats and leaping five to six feet into the air. She was a maniac. We saw 360’s, spread eagles, full gainers and a myriad of other tricks until she disappeared over the far edge of the lake. No one said a word, but we all knew this was not the same Elizabeth that lived with us for the previous twelve years.

11.98 miles down the lake and secluded by 250 foot high walls of canyon, evil men were preparing to discharge 10,431 gallons of used motor oil into the lake. It was a cheap way to unload what would otherwise be an expense of over \$4,000.00 in state and federal petroleum discard taxes. These men had total disregard for the pristine beauty and unsoiled fragility of this part of Mother Earth. Looming above them, high on the canyon walls, were ancient stone writings from an earlier civilization that had a profound respect for the balance of nature. One excerpt: He who loves the sky, the earth and the water has the strength of ten men.

By this time the park rangers were in hot pursuit of Elizabeth. She had taken a red bandana and tied it around her forehead. At full-throttle she was miraculously pulling away from the rangers driving 200 horsepower speedboats. As she approached a certain part of the lake it was as if she had seen it many times before in her dreams. “Oh, this magnificent lake”, she yelled at the top of her lungs, “Oh, how I love this lake. I love the azure sky. I love the strength of the beautiful rocks and sheer canyon walls. I love the emerald green water.” As she exclaimed these immutable truths, she felt a sense of power surge through her body she had never experienced before.

As she rounded the bend of Jumping Deer Canyon she saw the cargo boat just ahead of her 352 yards. The boat sat deep in the water sideways from her direction. On the bow

stood a gruff looking man holding the only set of keys to the holding tanks of the toxic, thick, black poison. He knelt to unlock the compartment containing the pump. Elizabeth knew she only had a few seconds. She raced her machine to 83.7 mph. She somehow mysteriously knew this part of the canyon like the back of her hand. Just in front of the boat and only two to three inches below the water was a smooth, flat rock. Elizabeth hit the natural launch pad perfectly. She was sailing sixteen feet through the air! The man with the keys stood up startled and confused. At that precise moment Elizabeth came flying by and snatched the keys from his grimy and callused hands.

The flying warrior hit the water on the other side of the boat and made a hard turn to the right. As she was leaving the canyon the park rangers were speeding in to trap their flagrant violator of lake rules and safety procedures. Elizabeth pulled to a stop. The rangers drew their pistols, "Freeze, flagrant violator, freeze". Elizabeth tossed the keys to one of the rangers and pointing in the direction of the cargo boat, said, "the real violators are over there". They looked to see what she was talking about. It was a boat they had cited before for minor dumping of oil products. They turned to tell her "thanks" and she was gone, vanished from sight.

Close to sunset a weary and torture-fatigued Elizabeth motored up to the back of the houseboat. Mom and I were there, nervously awaiting the arrival of our little Indian. She dragged herself aboard and fell into the arms of her loving mother. "Oh mother. Oh mother, I have past the test. I have past the test!" From that moment on, Elizabeth has proved time and time again that she has no fear. She had past the test and nothing would ever scare her again.