

Into the Vortex
by Steve Schlich

They drove into Sedona on the first day of the trip, and the sunset made it as surreal as an expressionist painting. Red sandstone glowed back at them everywhere they looked, as if those spectacular crimson clouds had solidified on the ground.

They had a single morning—tomorrow—to experience a vortex there, all the spare time Chris had allocated on their way to the Grand Canyon. But this unexpected bit of heaven deserved more. Chris knew it and fretted that her carefully plotted schedule might collapse so early into the trip.

She also knew that Tom would tell her “Chill, we’re on vacation.” Good advice, for once.

So they explored a tiny shop named *Mystic Sedona*, looking for a map to the vortexes. Well, Chris was looking. Tom found amusement browsing a four-shelf display case of nothing but Richard Sutphen self-help books and recordings.

“Nice work if you can get it, shyster.”

Chris looked over at him. “What?”

“Remember that stop smoking CD I bought? ‘Works immediately! Guaranteed!’ Uh-huh. Dickie here got my money, but I’m still smoking.”

Chris’s expression overlaid sympathy with a scolding. “He’s not a magician, Tom. *You* have to do the work.”

“Quite the scam,” Tom muttered. Chris had never been addicted to anything. He drifted to the vortex section, and her, and browsed a trade paperback.

The back cover explained the geography: there are only eleven areas in the entire world that contain a vortex. Or several. These are places where energy from within the Earth is focused at the surface. Things, maybe mystical things, can happen there. You can find the vortexes are in exotic and ancient places like Stonehenge and Winchester Cathedral in England. And Sedona, Arizona, USA.

Tom chuckled to himself. *Who am I to dispute the Wisdom of the Ages?*

He waved the paperback at the store clerk. “Why isn’t the Polar Vortex listed in here? That’s one place you couldn’t pay me to go.”

The clerk hesitated for a long moment, either unsure of what she'd just heard, or afraid to correct a customer. But she recovered and plowed ahead.

“Th-that’s weather, sir. These vortexes are energy.”

Now Tom hesitated, and Chris couldn’t tell if it was non-comprehension or embarrassment that his lame joke wasn’t recognized as such. Finally:

“Well...good! I didn’t bring a sweater.”

The clerk managed a polite laugh. Chris rolled her eyes, bought the map she was holding, and got out of there quickly. Tom followed and outside, they wrestled it open.

Chris: “I want to go to one of these four major ones.”

But her brow furrowed as she read details. Tom looked over her shoulder.

“Whoa, you mean these four? Boynton Canyon, 6.5 miles with some rock scrambling. Cathedral Rock Trail, only 1.5 miles but with serious climbing. Bell Rock Pathway, 3.6 miles. And the last part is up the side of a butte. Come on, Chris! You gotta be a mountaineer.”

Chris sighed. “It says that Sedona Airport Loop is a moderate walk.”

“Yah, 4.3 miles. We don’t have the time for *any* of these. Just the morning.”

She tried logic. “If we walk at 2 miles an hour, we get there in an hour. We spend an hour there and another hour coming back. If we leave at Nine, then we get back by Noon. It’s only two hours to our next stop. We’ve got time. Tom, you can’t just drive up to enlightenment. ”

Tom pointed to a smaller icon. “You can drive to that one. Is it a vortex? It looks close to the road.”

“It’s a minor point of energy. Not as strong as a big vortex.” She paused to take deep breath. “Tom. This is part of the trip. I want the full effect.”

Tom nodded, reluctantly feeling the emotional geography. The big, powerful vortexes were accessible only by strenuous hikes. *Of course*. The easy-to-reach ones? *Lesser* vortexes.

“Chris, we came to see the Grand Canyon, right? This place is beautiful, but it’s just a warm-up, you said. Okay, look. If you want to go to one of those big four, do it. I’m all in favor. But not me. You go, and I’ll find my enlightenment in a patio bar. I’d just slow you down anyway.”

She fell silent for a few beats, gathering. There was nothing new about this discussion/argument/evasion.

“You can do that at home. Come on, Tom. This is something to share.”

Back at their room, they fell into familiar married-couple haggling. He finally gave in, to avoid tears. But she yielded too. They agreed to visit the drive-up vortex. She was resigned but glad to stop arguing. He treaded lightly.

The next morning, they ate breakfast and drove to the “minor point of energy” next to the road. It was still a bit of a hike.

Tom was relieved to find his wife loosening up. Bombastic notes about New Age philosophy, in script all over the backside of their new vortex map, had offered them some laughs. Mockery provided a way to ease their unease with the unknown.

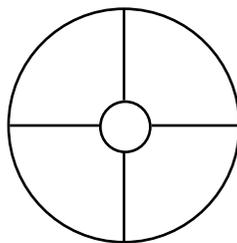
What to think of vortexes? Curious and skeptical at the same time, they joked as they made their way across a field of substantial sandstone hillocks. Should they be listening to a Windham Hill recording? Carrying crystals? *Ooo, we’re bad!*

Arrival at the spot silenced their laughter. There was an unspoken reverence about the place that hung in the air like the wet heaviness that lingers before a storm.

The uneven, narrow path conveniently widened and flattened *exactly* at this “lesser” vortex. Tom realized that someone had actually hand-cut into the slope to create this spot. A massive job!

The shoveled-away high side revealed a nearly vertical wall of smaller rocks that lined the cut like a stack of bowling balls. The path widened here to a dozen feet before the hillock’s slope resumed on the low side.

Previous visitors had gathered small flat stones and laid out several medicine wheels on the reddish earth, ranging from a foot to ten feet across:



Chris carried a small plastic bag for soil, but couldn't bring herself to fill it from any of the medicine wheels. She tucked it into her pocket sheepishly. "I'm just superstitious, I guess."

She hiked off to find a private spot and Tom stood in the center of the biggest medicine wheel, fantasizing what punishment might befall a blasphemer like himself. But the only thing that happened was his cigarette lighter, already threatening to fail yesterday, would not light.

Okay. Maybe I shouldn't smoke at a vortex anyway.

So he stood inside the wheel, trying to feel something. Annnd...nothing. Nothing but a wish for the cigarette that he couldn't light.

The hand-dug rock wall was at least fifteen feet high. If you really wanted to reach the top, you could just back up the oath and walk above the cut. But some kid, maybe 10 years old, just had to scramble up the raw rock face. You're immortal at that age, remember?

Examining the wall with a thousand-yard stare, Tom didn't even notice the kid until his whining broke Tom's reverie. There was a young mother there, too. Where had they come from? The mother's attempts to *not* sound panicky hung in the air.

The two of them snapped into sharp focus for Tom, and he couldn't look away.

The mother cried out to her child, and unexpectedly, her fear ripped into the pit of Tom's stomach. The boy had climbed up about ten feet from the bottom, but now couldn't get any farther up—or down. No matter what he did, he was going to fall, and there was a nasty rock landing below. He was going to get hurt.

"Calm down," Tom called to the boy. "You'll be all right. Just be calm."

The mother looked at Tom with disbelief. "Leave us alone!"

"I'm trying to help you."

"You can't! Shut up! Go away!"

Tom didn't. He stood there angrily with his arms folded, watching every move the two made. But staying silent was the hardest thing he'd ever done.

The scene was torturous. The kid's mother would tell him which foot to put where, so he wouldn't fall, and then try to soothe and encourage him to actually move his foot. And sometimes, he would.

This drama played out in excruciating slow motion, accompanied by the soundtrack of Mom's descent into deeper panic. If her child fell while following her directions, it be her fault. And how badly would he be hurt? The rocks below were waiting to break his bones.

As he came close to falling so many times! Tom made a move to join the boy's mother beneath him, but she screamed him away. *Did he think he was going to catch her son?* Tom tried to leave, just walk away, but found that he could not.

Why should he care about some stupid kid he didn't know? Some stupid kid who had no one but himself to blame for his predicament. Some stupid kid who...who could pay with pain, for the rest of his life, for the recklessness of any ten-year old. Some stupid kid like Tom was at that age. But not as lucky.

So Tom stood frozen in the background until at last, the kid made it down. Somehow! His mother hugged him and cried. The kid cried and finally, Tom found that he could walk away. Because his own eyes were wet. *What the hell?* He felt as though someone had thrown cold water on him.

Mother and son stumbled away, still noisy. Tom noticed that he'd kicked the stones of several medicine wheels while witnessing the drama. He moved them back and tried to light a cigarette again. *Nope, forget it.*

Chris returned. How long had she been gone? Ten minutes? An hour? Neither of them knew. Her plastic bag had some soil in it. Her face had small smudges of red dirt on both temples, and one in the center of her forehead.

She looked serene and said nothing. There was an uncomfortable space between them, and Tom tried to close it with a ribbing.

"You didn't find Buddha, did you? True enlightenment?"

She smiled at him with unrequested sympathy. "Not Buddha, anyway." She paused. "Tom. I don't mind you asking. But right now, let's just be quiet and enjoy the scenery."

...making her the second woman to tell him to shut up. Almost a trend...

They sat on the downhill edge of the trail, looking out at Sedona's fairy-tale landscape.

"Don't worry," she said. "I'm not going religious on you."

But obviously she'd had an experience. She'd felt something. Tom was jealous. Something had moved her, and all he felt was adrenaline from watching that stupid kid almost die. His stomach hurt.

He told Chris about the incident, including the mother's rebukes.

"You wanted to help them."

Her tone of surprise felt like *another* rebuke. "I didn't want to watch that kid die on those rocks! Yeah, I wanted to help. And I could have, too!"

Chris held him close and waited for his tension to subside. Back at the car, a pink jeep was parked next to them. A sign in the window read:

Sacred Earth Tours

Here is a fascinating experience uniting New Age perspectives with ancient earth wisdom. Learn to clear aura and walk in balance. Tap the energy of the earth's power spots and enhance personal growth. 3 Hours: \$40.00 per person.

He nodded at it with a sad laugh. "Maybe I'd feel something if I paid their fee and took their tour. I *wanted* to feel something."

"Look at yourself." Chris held both of his hands, still fidgety but no longer shaking. "You did."

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