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Caught in a Vortex

Two hikers stumble upon a private ceremony

Elissa Ely



TO BE CLEAR, WE WERE NOT IN SEDONA FOR THE VORTEXES. LIVING IN no-nonsense, stone-wall-crossed New England, the concept of cosmic energy centers among the red rocks feels a stretch. It's all we can do to deal with witches.

It had taken many hours to travel from Boston to Arizona, and sunset was coming. My daughter and I drove past the aura photography shop and chakra reading center, heading toward a short trail a few miles away. But we were tired, and when we saw a sign for Bell Rock—one of the best-known vortex sites, and a closer trail—we set prejudice aside and pulled off.

The path to Bell Rock is dusty; every variety of red pigment slips under fingernails and paints socks. There was a dry wind that, I felt certain, was not driven by spiritual currents. Circling up the slick rock, I noticed a trio to the side of us, also circling up: first a young man in a light suit, then a young woman carrying some voluminous bag in her arms, and finally, another woman dragging what looked like a collapsed tent.

How sensible, I thought: They've come to watch the sunset, and they've brought something to sit on—like planting a cabana on the beach.

Slowly, steadily, they hiked to a plateau facing west. While the first woman waited with her bag, the other two fussed for a minute. The result was taller than a tent, more like a portable armoire with curtains meeting in the middle. The woman and her bag ducked inside, and her companions brought the curtains together. I could see bare feet moving underneath. It felt like an illusion; she had disappeared, and some large member of the cat family was about to spring out.

None of this was my business (as my companion pointed out), but instead of climbing higher on Bell Rock, I sat down and waited. I blame any vortex for uncontrollable curiosity.

The armoire shook and bumped and tilted; some kinetic process was taking place inside. Outside, the curtain-closers wrestled it steady with effort. They, too, were waiting for a panther to spring out.

Finally, the curtains were drawn apart from within. No panther.

It was a bride.

Her voluminous bag had transformed into a full-length wedding gown with billowing sleeves. She wore a pair of white high heels (heroically, I

Many people believe Bell Rock in Sedona, Arizona, to be a vortex site, a place where the ground gives off high energy. PATRICIA M. HIGHSMITH/LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

thought) and a short veil. They were too far away for me to see faces, but clairvoyance was unnecessary. Sedona. Vortex. Sunset. Wedding.

Tenuously (but still heroically), the bride teetered upward in her heels, tripping now and then on cracks, while her groom grasped her elbow, and the third woman dragged the armoire. From a distance, I could see crimson coating the base of the gown and starting to bleed upward. White defines a wedding, but perhaps in this case it was not strategic.

My daughter was hissing loudly. The hiss said, This private moment is none of your business, staring is causing me embarrassment, and you weren't even invited. I started to hiss back—who can expect privacy wearing a full-length wedding gown on a vortex?—but could not argue her final point: We hadn't been invited.

The sky was finishing up now, wistfully colored, quickly fading. Our headlamps were in the car and the path back was unlit. With reluctance on my part (they had not even reached the ring ceremony!) and relief on my daughter's, we turned away and headed back down.

And that was that: One of those random molecular collisions travelers experience, a jostle of contact before each atom continues on its separate way.

A few weeks later, back in my New England kitchen and glancing through the Sunday paper's obituaries and weddings, it seemed as if the vortex had followed me. I turned a page and came upon a half-page photo and story of a bride and groom on Bell Rock . . . the same weekend we had been there. What magic was this?

Their irresistible history followed. The couple had met on an amateur sports team far from Arizona. After a decade of traveling and living together, they decided to wed in a location both agreed was their spiritual sanctuary: Sedona. The sunset ceremony had been pared down—bride, groom, officiant. Afterward, they celebrated in a nearby restaurant, where an unknown couple at the next table approached and paid for their dinner. The entire anecdote was a reporter's dream.

I looked at the photograph again. The couple smiled into each other's eyes, red rocks behind them and vermilion sky above. The groom wore a dark suit, the bride a sleeveless gown.

Memory stirred. That voluminous bag on Bell Rock had held a gown with sleeves the size of rolling hills. I consulted myself again. The groom I had watched on Bell Rock had on a light suit. Any nostalgia I felt was incorrect: two happy wedded people, but not my two happy wedded people.

My two people weren't mine, of course, but still, I feel proprietary. At this very moment, they are somewhere in the world, if not in the Sunday paper. They climbed Bell Rock at sunset in a suit, gown, and heels. They were married on top of a vortex or a non-vortex, with stains on the hem to prove it. I know all this to be true, because I was their gazing, uninvited guest, throwing rice from a distance, wishing them nothing but happiness through the rest of their lives.

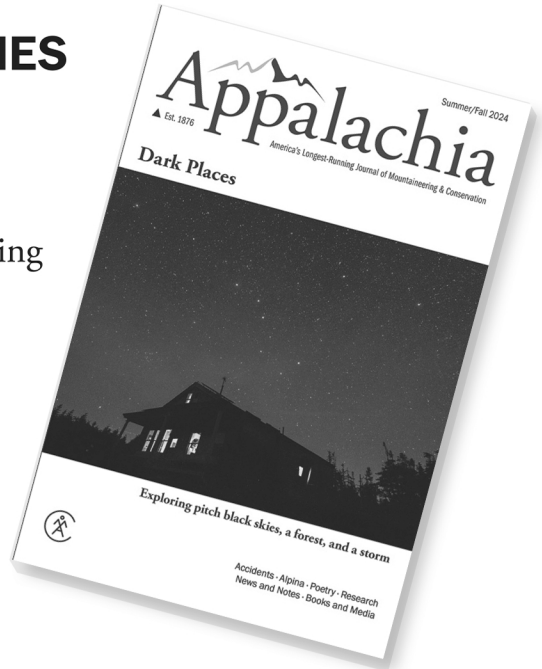
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