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Julie Hensley
Eastern Kentucky University

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JULIE HENSLEY

AT THE BOTTOM

When they started into the canyon, it was so hot the Indians had stopped running the mule trains. A pile of backpacks sat in the dust, and next to them, beneath the shade of aluminum roofing, the animals stood, swishing their tails. Nearby, a man and his teenage son unloaded cases of soda from the back of an old van. He eyed Sam and Addie with suspicion, but he didn't say anything. Flies hovered everywhere, especially around the port-a-johns at the trail head.

The rest of their party had driven up the night before and started down before daybreak. There was Liz, who taught at the same elementary school as Addie, and Liz's husband Smitty. At the last minute, they had added Noah. He was Sam's college roommate, and his wife had left him three weeks before. As usual, Sam had been detained at work. A deadline had kept him up most of the night. They hadn't left the house until almost eight.

They paused a moment at the rim. The canyon looked faded and tired, nothing like the view from atop the Bright Angel trail. The walls weren't as steep here, and they lacked color. Everything looked chalky. It felt like the canyon though. It carried the same sound, or maybe it was a lack of sound. The air seemed to breathe out of the space in the same way. The trail was a white line cut first in a series of switch backs and then along a gradual decline, growing smaller and smaller. They couldn't see any other hikers.

At first it was so steep that neither of them said anything. They had to look down, watching their footing. At one point, Sam started to slide, sending a spray of pebbles across the trail.

It took more than an hour for them to reach the first plateau. It was easier going then, but hot. The trail veered in and out of a dry river bed. The sand was deep in places, and it seemed to hold on to the heat. Finally, they sat down on a flat boulder, partially shaded by rock and palo verde. They had frozen the water in their packs the night before,

and now it was melted but still cold. It was hard to stop drinking. They ate peanut butter and raisins rolled in soft tortillas.

Addie had a can of Coke and a pudding cup in her pack, kept cool by the melting ice. They were for Sam, surprises to keep him going. He looked like he was doing okay. His legs were stretched out in front of him, and he was leaning back into his pack. She had buzzed his hair tight for the trip, and he had a bandana wrapped around his head to keep his scalp from burning.

He smiled when he saw her watching him. “What?”

“You’re cute.” She leaned forward and kissed him. He tasted like salt. “I have a present for you.”

“Oh, yeah?” He looked suspicious. “What?”

“If you could have either a Coke or a pudding right now, which would you want?”

Sam laughed. “Pudding,” he said. “Definitely pudding.”

He licked the top after he tore it off.

This month made five years they had been a couple. There had been some terrific fights in the beginning, but now they understood each other. A few weeks ago Liz had mentioned the possibility of Sam proposing on this trip. “It’s perfect,” she had said. “I mean, can you think of a more romantic backdrop than the Grand Canyon?” Addie had shrugged off the idea.

Now Sam had finished the pudding. He was trying to scrape the sides of the cup with his aluminum spork. “This thing doesn’t really work as a spoon or a fork.” He held it out for her to see. “It can’t save that much space.”

“Let’s get going.” Addie stood up and swung her pack over her shoulders. She held her hand out to pull Sam up.

He smiled up at her. “I want my Coke too.”

“Forget it,” she said. “I have to keep waving the carrot.”

Addie arrived at the campground ahead of Sam. She had to make her way down a steep incline, and she heard the waterfall long before she could see it. Only after she reached the bottom could she look up and see the power of the thing—water plummeting over a hundred foot cliff. Below, a pool spread out of the spray, a spectrum of cool turquoise. Tents were already staked along the stream, which was bordered by a thick grove of hardwoods. The water held onto its color, even as it wound through the campsites. The air was humid, and the light shone green through the canopy of cottonwoods and sycamores. Ferns and rushes curved out of the wide places where the course of the stream slowed. It was like no part of Arizona she had ever seen.

There were too many people for the small campground. Some sites were choked with groups of ten or fifteen, and some of the people—the girls, especially—seemed young with slender hips and high shrieks. As she walked through the sites, Addie scanned faces, looking for Liz.

When she paused to shift her pack, someone caught her eye. A woman with a shaved head and a swinging necklace made of bones and shells was watching her closely.

“Are you just getting here?”

Addie had to look around to make sure the woman was talking to her. She nodded. Three other women stood off to the side, cinching packs and gathering bits of debris off the ground.

“Do you want this site? We’re heading out soon, but we’re only willing to give it to someone who packed her own gear in.” She leaned toward Addie, striking a conspiratorial pose. “So many of these jokers send their supplies in on the mules or, worse, helicopter them down.”

Addie smiled. “Actually,” she said, “I’m supposed to be meeting friends. I think they’re further in. I guess...” She paused, choosing her words carefully. “I guess I got a late start.”

One of the other women looked up then. “Did you do the hike down by yourself?”

“No,” she said, after just a moment. “My boyfriend’s behind me. He’ll be here soon.”

Later, when it was dark and the creek bed was thrumming, the murmurs of each campsite rising against the canyon walls, Addie retired the same time Liz did, even though she was still wide awake. The boys were just outside, passing around a joint and taking swigs of Jack Daniels, playing some card game she didn’t understand. Every so often one of them would burst into laughter, masculine and staccato. Their voices were charged with drink, and she could hear Sam’s above the others.

She removed her shirt and shorts and lay back on top of her sleeping bag. They had left the rain cover off, and she stared through the netting above her head. Outside were the sweep of flashlights and the blue glow of gas stoves, crickets and the steady coursing of water. But over all these loomed the walls of the canyon itself. It was like looking up from deep inside a well.

The next morning they all went swimming below the falls. They made their way through the campground early when the smell of coffee was thick. The people they passed had sleep-glazed eyes. Some carried spades and rolls of tissue into the screen of trees. The guys walked three abreast in front of the girls, so Addie could see the sprinkling of freckles shining across Sam’s shoulders. Each step stirred grasshoppers from the undergrowth.

Liz was talking about her new sandals. Smitty had a pair too. “White water rafting shoes,” she called them.

“Are you two planning on going rafting?” Addie asked.

“No, but you can run in them. That’s the best part. They’re sandals you can run in. Show them, honey,” she yelled to Smitty, and he started to jog.

The pool was empty that early, just as they had hoped. A shelf of rock curved out over the water on one side, and they leaped off it. The water was very cold. Addie found Sam, and they clung to each other, slick limbed, bobbing together in the water. Around

them, the pool held color like a lake. Eventually the others climbed out, but Addie stayed. She dove down, trying to touch the bottom. Deep beneath the water was the steady rhythm of the falls hitting the surface. It sounded strangely like a pulse. She waited until her lungs began to burn before breaking for air.

When she surfaced, unfamiliar voices echoed across the water—a throng of new campers were already arriving, making their way down the switchbacks overhead.

Sam was lying with the others on the shore. She could see the four of them sprawled in a row. None of them had towels, but the rocks were warm and smooth. Liz and Smitty had removed their new sandals and laid them out in matching pairs. Liz was reading a novel, holding it out at a strange angle to block the sun.

Addie couldn't see their faces. It wasn't clear if the guys were talking or just lying there. Men were like that together. They didn't have to talk. Or they could talk about nothing—a game or the weather. Each could still know that the other was okay. Noah was twenty-seven, same as Sam and Addie. She couldn't imagine being divorced already.

For a while, she gave herself over to the water's gentle lift. The water was so cool, and it had a faintly sweet smell, almost like the creeks that came out of the mountains back East, a mineral scent. She finally climbed out when other swimmers arrived.

She sat down next to Sam and pulled her knees up to her chest. Sam stretched out his hand to cup her damp ankle, but he didn't say anything.

Liz put her book down. "We should have come in May," she said. "It wouldn't have been as hot, and we wouldn't have had to put up with all these kids."

Across the pool, another party was spreading their towels on the rocks. The girls, who wore stringy bikinis, immediately began rubbing their legs with oil. One of the guys tore open a bag of potato chips.

"Nice breakfast," Liz said. "I wonder if he knows he's got to pack all his trash out of here."

"Careful," Addie warned her. "Voices carry."

Liz laughed. “What? Are they going to come beat me up? This isn’t Club Med. Who wears a bathing suit like that backpacking?”

Now the guys sat up to have a look.

“I think it was a sensible decision,” Noah said.

Sam looked at Addie. “If you’d brought one that small I could have packed a spoon and a fork.”

As if on cue, the tallest of the girls stood up and bent to retrieve something from her bag. Her bikini was even smaller viewed from the back.

Smitty whistled long and low. “With a suit like that you could have brought a whole air mattress.”

“What’s wrong with my suit?” Addie was wearing a racing bathing suit, black with sturdy straps crossing in the middle of her back. It was two pieces, but only a narrow ribbon of skin showed at her midsection.

“Nothing,” Sam assured her, but his eyes never left the girls.

“Noah,” Smitty said, “You’re a free man. Go work some magic.”

“I wouldn’t know what to say to those girls.”

Liz snorted. “Tell them you’re old enough to buy beer.”

When they left the falls, the boys headed toward Supai, but the girls walked back to camp to start lunch. They didn’t want to go back to the Indian village. They had found it depressing when they passed through on the way in. The houses were just shacks, some with tar paper roofs. Pieces of warped cardboard patched broken windows. Most of the houses had tiny paddocks to house the mules that ran the pack trains.

In the center of the village was a store where campers had to stop to register and pay fees. A rock held the door open. Strips of cloudy plastic kept the air—chilled by a rattling window air conditioner—from escaping, but they let the flies inside.

The men were going back to the little store to buy chocolate because Liz had decided she wanted some. “Hershey’s special dark,” she’d instructed them. “Get the big kind, and hustle back so it doesn’t melt.”

The girls had just reached the springhouse when she said it.

“Do you think I might be pregnant?” Liz posed the question so casually. And as soon as she said it, she bent and took a long drink from the stream of water.

A pipe caught the water from its source in the rocks and brought it into the springhouse, where it spilled down to collect in a low trough.

Addie thrust one of her bottles into the stream. “What makes you ask that? Are you guys trying?”

“Well, not really. But we’re not *not* trying either.”

“What does that mean?”

“Well, you know how it took my sister so long to get pregnant? We decided I should go off the pill a few weeks ago.” She looked down as she spoke. “You know, clean my system out. We’ll probably start trying for real in a few months.”

Addie watched Liz give the top of her water bottle another twist. “Why didn’t you say anything?” she asked.

“I’ve hardly seen you all summer.” Finally, Liz met her gaze. “What? I’m telling you now.”

They fell into step again when they reached the main trail. After a few minutes Addie asked, “Do you want to be pregnant right now?”

“Sure,” Liz said, quietly. “We could make it work. We have the space now.”

“What makes you think you are?” she asked. “The fact you’re wanting chocolate?”

“Mostly.”

They were crossing the stream now, Liz in front, making their way carefully from one rock to another.

“I don’t think that means anything,” Addie told her. “I want chocolate every day.”

Squirrels had broken into the tent. They had chewed little holes into the netting. A bag of gorp was torn open and scattered across the sleeping bags. Cupping her hands, Addie swept up the mess as best she could.

She thrust her hand into the side of Sam’s pack. Her fingers, groping, first felt two power bars and then something else—a tiny wooden box. She pulled it out and set it in the palm of her hand. It was a reddish wood, sanded smooth, and inlaid with stone to create a design. The desert at night: a sliver of pearlized moon hanging above a shelf of rock. Addie’s breath quickened behind her ribs. She knew she should put it back.

The ring was turquoise, but not the blue kind. It was pale green, roughly the size of her thumb nail. The silver holding the stone was carved into tiny, intricate rivulets. When she lifted it from the box, her throat caught. It was the color of the lichen that etched the limestone back in Virginia. Hiking to Bearfence Rocks the first time Sam came home with her for the holidays, she had told him how in Arizona she sometimes dreamed about it—that rush of green through winter hardwoods.

She returned it to the box. She arranged the power bars on top, just as they had been, and zipped everything up.

She didn’t tell Liz, moments later, when the two of them bent over the picnic table to light their butane burners. Now she was carrying a secret. When she held up two soup mixes and said, “I wonder which Sam would want—split pea or hillbilly bean,” the secret was there.

After lunch, when they all felt lazy and they sat around the table watching Noah practice card tricks, it was there. Sam caught her eye, and that secret grazed her insides like a passing fish.

There was a full moon over the canyon. It shed enough light—even through the ceiling of thick summer leaves—that it wasn’t necessary to turn on headlamps. They sat around in a

circle, talking. Addie sipped wine from a plastic cup. The boys had brought the bottle back from the village that afternoon, but the wine had turned. Addie sipped it anyway.

Smitty said that with the moon so bright, the waterfall would be backlit and beautiful, and soon after, he and Liz slid off together through the trees. Addie leaned near Sam's ear. "We should go for a walk too." She could smell him—just him, not shampoo or cologne.

He stretched his arms over his head. "I'm tired," he said. "Aren't we supposed to try to make the Colorado tomorrow?"

"That's fourteen miles," Noah said.

"I'm still sore from the hike down. Aren't you tired?" Sam's fingers began kneading slow circles across Addie's lower back.

"Sure," she said. When they were alone together inside the tent, she slid out of her clothes and into the sleeping bag. They had a double sleeping bag, made from two custom bags zipped together.

Addie reached for him in the dark, and her hands found soft cotton. "Why are you wearing a T-shirt?" she whispered.

"We're outside. I don't want to be cold."

"It's ninety degrees," she said. "You're not going to get cold."

"You don't know that. So I want to wear a shirt. What's it matter?"

"I want to feel your chest."

"Well maybe I don't feel sexy," he said.

"Good God."

Noah snickered outside.

"Look," Sam said, "You know I don't like sleeping outdoors. I get tense. I feel like bugs are going to be crawling on me or something."

Addie rolled over and sighed.

“I’m trying,” he said. “I’m having fun. I just want to wear my T-shirt. I just want to go to sleep.”

When Sam’s breathing settled into the shallow rhythm of sleep, Addie rose and put her clothes back on. She didn’t cross the stream and pick up the trail. Instead she followed the cutbank above the campground. Overhead, the moon shone eerily blue, making the tree trunks seem pale and ghostly. Instead of scanning the ground, her eyes kept climbing. It was so different to be here in the belly of the canyon after always seeing it from above.

Three years before, when they had first driven the South Rim, Sam had told her that it made him feel small—all those layers of stone and color, the weight of time they represented.

“It’s a little like making love to someone,” he had said. And when pressed, he had added, “You have layers. Every time I’m with you, I have to work my way in.”

“Physically or emotionally?” she had asked.

“Oh.” He had shrugged. “I guess both.”

Addie pulled herself onto a large outcropping of rock. A handful of campers were still awake. Lit flashlights made their tents into Japanese lanterns, points of color in a scene that everywhere else shone as silvery as the finish of an old movie. The rock beneath her still held the sun’s warmth. Across the creek, the opposite wall rose spectrally out of the tree tops. She stared for a long time.

The next morning, Liz said she wasn’t going to do the hike. They were sitting around the table eating instant oatmeal with dried fruit and blanched almonds. When she made the announcement, the guys looked at Smitty, assuming he was going to handle it, but he just stared into his bowl.

“Are you feeling sick?” Addie asked.

“It’s not that.” Liz glared at her. “I just don’t want to go.”

“Why?”

“Because it’s fucking scary.” She pointed northeast, deeper into the canyon. “A mile in that direction is the next descent. It’s two hundred feet down a cliff face.”

Noah looked confused. “I thought we didn’t need rappelling gear.”

“You don’t,” Smitty assured him. “They’ve carved steps and anchored rebar into the rock.”

“Aren’t you going to tell them about the signs?” Liz folded her arms across her chest. “They’ve got signs posted saying how many people have died there.”

“Seriously?” Sam looked at Addie. “How many people?”

“What are you going to do all day?” Addie asked. “We won’t be back until dark.”

“I’ll read my book,” Liz said. “I’m not trying to stop the rest of you. I just don’t want to go.”

After a while, the rest of the group set off without her. Smitty and Noah walked in front, and Sam fell in behind them, but he hung back from the group. Addie matched his pace.

“What’s up?” she finally asked.

“I don’t know if I’m okay with this,” he said.

“What are you talking about?”

He stopped walking then and glanced down the trail. Smitty and Noah were twenty yards ahead of them. “The climb.” He touched her arm as he said it, his voice hushed. “We don’t rock climb. If we get there and I don’t like the look of it, I’m turning around.”

“Are you serious?”

“Hell yes! I hope you will too”

“Oh my God.”

“Addie,” he said, “It’s when people aren’t comfortable to begin with that this kind of stuff gets really dangerous.”

She took a deep breath and placed her hands on his shoulders. “Can you please just give it a chance, Sam?”

Moments later they were standing in a row looking over the edge. The stream that trickled through the campground cascaded two hundred feet here. A fine mist refracted the sunlight into a spectrum of color below them.

Smitty pointed to where, maybe thirty feet down, the trail suddenly ended. “Last year,” he told them, “Liz froze up right there. When it was time to hold onto the rebar and climb, she lost it. We had to turn back, but it took her nearly an hour to climb back up. She was a mess. I really thought she had talked herself into trying it again though.”

“Well it’s pretty steep to do without gear,” Noah said.

“It’s the only way to the river,” Smitty said. “And look how secluded it is down there.”

The pool at the bottom was bigger than the one they had swam the day before. From there the stream flowed into another pool, and another, and another, as far as their eyes could travel into the canyon. Far off, two figures waded waist deep in the turquoise water, but they were the only other people.

“It’s beautiful,” Addie whispered. Sam didn’t say anything.

Smitty started down, then Noah. Addie looked at Sam. “Do you want me to go before you or after you?”

“I’ll go.”

At first the trail was nothing, less than nothing. They proceeded in a line down the steps the reservation had carved into the stone. The trail curved through a cave, where the surface of the stone was glazed from all the hands that had traced it.

“It gets slick over here,” Smitty called out when he reached the other side.

They followed him, and when they emerged into sunlight, the spray from the falls wet the rock and their skin, making everything slippery just as they had to begin the real descent. Sam reached for the rebar and swung himself onto the face of the cliff, and Addie followed. For a moment her foot slid over the rock as if it would just keep going,

but then she found a pocket, a dip in the rock. For several minutes she didn't move. Her fingers sweat around the rebar. Her chest hammered as if it wasn't the play of her pulse, but someone above her pounding on the rock. She had to remind herself to breathe.

She reached for the next loop of rebar, first with her left hand and then her right, but her feet struggled to find the next loop. They swung and scrambled. The course was made for someone taller. Her eyes held tight to the rock, and she progressed, slowly.

About half way down, she made her mistake. She knew better than to look down, but she let herself look up. Above her, the rocks were blackened and shiny from the spray. She could see the cliff from above, only now she could see herself in miniature, a stick figure clinging to the rock. Her stomach turned. Saliva gathered in the recesses of her mouth. She pressed her cheek against the damp rock and held her breath.

“Addie!” Sam’s voice rose sharply up the cliff face. “Are you okay?”

She couldn't move, not even to shake her head.

“Hold tight. I’m coming back up.”

Soon he was beneath her. There was his red bandana. “I’m here,” he said. “I didn’t realize you were having problems.”

His fingers clasped her boot, and a pathetic noise escaped her throat.

“I’m just going to guide your foot down,” he explained. “Trust me”—his mouth brushed her calf—“You can do this.”

When they reached the bottom, she was crying. She couldn't stop crying.

“You’re okay.” Sam held her face in his hands. “You’re fine,” he said. “You did it.”

She collapsed against him. He was sweaty. Smitty and Noah stood back, facing the water giving her time to get it together.

They smiled when she and Sam joined them. “You did it,” Noah said.

But now something marked their smiles, a premonition of the hours ahead. They would be very careful with her, clasping their hands to give her a foot up when

bouldering was required, watching anxiously for her head to appear when she dove into a pool. The ring in Sam's daypack, nested in its beautiful wooden box, would not come out.

The guys kicked off their boots and headed into the water, but Addie held back. She had been relegated to girl.

They were tired and covered in dust when they returned to camp that night. Liz's nose was pink and shiny from lying in the sun, but she was herself again, quick to laugh. She had conned four beers off the kids at the neighboring campsite and placed them in the stream to keep them cold. Now she stood on the bank and fished them out. "Catch of the day," she said, handing them around.

"No thanks." Addie stripped off her clothes and waded into the stream.

"What's with her?" Liz asked. None of the guys answered. They gave her a look, a look that said, don't ask, we'll tell you later.

Addie sank to her knees and shut her eyes. Here the bed of the stream was soft with silt. She would have liked to take her bathing suit off, to feel nothing but water around her skin. When she opened her eyes, Sam was close by. He held a beer in one hand and a tiny bottle of trail soap in the other. She took a swig of beer. It tasted awful. It was cool, but like the wine the night before, it had muddled in the sun.

"You want me to lather you up?"

"No." Addie took the soap from him, and he waded back to the shore. The ascent had been easier, but he had talked her up, just as he had talked her down.

It was miserable soap. Biodegradable with a scent like the oil she had used to clean the saddles when she was a girl. She had to pour it over her head three times before she could work up a lather. She dug her nails into her scalp, feeling the grit caught in her hair. She was suddenly small and needy in a way that made her ache.

The next morning, the five of them made their way back to the Rim. They rose before daylight and packed in silence, shaking out their bedding and rolling up their tents in the eerie pre-dawn. Addie stayed close to Liz during the hike, even when the guys began to pull further and further ahead. Normally something inside would make her push to the front of the group, but that morning she sat on a retaining wall, waiting for Liz to catch her breath. She took long draws of water, which despite her filter, still tasted of silt.

At the top, they would pose together, handing their cameras off to a Supai man, whose wrinkled eyes would smile, black and wet-looking. But even when they cheered together and said, “Cheese!” part of Addie would still be back on the trail, watching as Sam, now a tiny figure, pressed up the switch backs for the final ascent. Perched far below, it was as if she was holding a kite—that stirring of panic at the tightening line, always the feeling it will snap.