

Perched on a sandstone outcropping under the hot May sun, staring down into a labyrinth of canyons, I notice a sign that stands as both an important warning and a welcomed call to action:

*"You are about to descend into a wilderness frontier, a place that demands dependence on self."*

Nervous excitement surges through me and I can't help but smile. I feel the weight of the water in my pack and grip my map tightly. I'm prepared...but still. The familiar human urge to challenge the unknown and potentially dangerous propels me forward. Step by step I make my way down to the desert floor in this corner of Grand Staircase Escalante National Monument.

Hugging Utah's southern border, Grand Staircase protects over a million acres of pristine, rugged canyon country that stands as a natural barrier to human expansion and development. This desert landscape broke wagon wheels and mercilessly wrung dry the unprepared travelers who dared cross the desolate terrain. Despite hundreds of years of human ingenuity and technological advancements, not much has changed.

To some, the value of Grand Staircase lies in what can't be seen, what's woven through the soil and rock walls that carve the dramatic landscapes across the sky: Valuable minerals and our desire for them threaten the size and integrity of this national monument. But to others the value of Grand Staircase and canyon country lies in both the scenery it offers and the challenges it presents. It's the intrinsic value of such a wild, natural place that could save it. To experience Grand Staircase and be better for it, is to find inspiration to protect it.

I decided to return to Utah after twelve years away to connect with a part of myself that seemed to slip through my fingers as my never-say-die 20s slowly faded into my anxious and stagnate 30s. I was ready to revisit that strong, fearless woman and I knew I could find her in the desert. To stand vulnerable, facing one of mother nature's most raw iterations with my own stripped-down, primal self was the humbling experience I needed. My boyfriend, Garrett- the gruff, eager outdoorsman- was excited to join me.

We both knew it might be our first and last time seeing Grand Staircase so wild and free in its expansiveness. In Escalante, the last outpost of civilization situated near the northeastern border of the monument, we were reminded of this reality. Stickers slapped on dusty, half-drunk Nalgene bottles and signs propped up in store windows declared a battle cry, "I Stand With Grand Staircase!"

I felt a surge of pride when I arrived, lucky to be in Grand Staircase at such a poignant time. Now I'm trying to remind myself of that as I trudge along a sandy trail, the sun beating through my hat and melting the sunscreen off my nose and ears. I deftly sidestep the sharp, sword-like leaves of a yucca plant that hang menacingly across the trail. Garrett is walking ahead of me, talking happily and motioning to a bird soaring above us. It's hard to hear what he's saying. I didn't know heat could be so *loud*. I remember my water and take a swig.

We're hiking through a wash, heading towards a slot canyon we believe to be nearby, at least according to our pre-trip research and patchy directions we've gathered from other hikers. Word is that the recent spring rains have flooded most of the slot canyons in the area, rendering them impassable. If that isn't frustrating enough, the precious water isn't even drinkable. The amount of silt in it would clog even the best filter.

In a week or so the water will soak into the porous sandstone and the canyons will dry out, but by then we'll be headed home. Motivated by a desperate hope to feast our eyes on sights we've only glimpsed in pictures, we decide to continue, half expecting our destination to lie submerged in a few feet of silty brown water.

We make our way along the rocky wash, watching lizards scurry through the sand, rushing to warm themselves on the sunbaked sandstones. The desert may seem like an uninviting wilderness full of rocks and sharp plants, but life thrives here. Wildflowers burst from cracks in the soil, painting the ground in hues of purple, white, and orange. Splashes of green dot the shaded canyon walls where hidden water seeps from minute cracks, allowing plants to grow into lush hanging gardens. It's a mesmerizing display and one I'm so enveloped in I hardly notice we've reached our destination.

In front of me is a fissure in a rock face, the opposing walls acting like magnets repelling each other just enough to form a five foot gap between them that meanders off into darkness. We've found our slot canyon.

As I move to hoist my pack off my shoulders, I notice a keyhole of light at the other end of the canyon. Due to the walls being frozen in a wave-like undulation towards and away from each other though, its appearance is deceptive. This keyhole is actually a door-sized exit at the other end of the canyon which is only about 200 feet away. My mind starts turning excitedly. Could I get through it, and if so, what's on the other side?

Sunlight bounces off the walls in patches, but the canyon is cast mostly in shadows and running along the bottom is, of course, a dark ribbon of brown water. Mother nature has bested us, determined to keep a mystery whatever magical world awaits on the other side.

We hear voices bouncing off the canyon walls. Two men, speaking in Russian, slosh out of the canyon and into the sunlight, one with his dry pants rolled up just to his knees, only testing the water. He has a camera focused on the second man who's walking towards him wearing nothing but his boxer briefs. This man's arms are raised above his head. He's laughing, gasping as the cold water laps at his stomach, and attempting to wade down the flooded canyon. Giving up, he runs and jumps in the sunshine, trying to get the blood flowing in his feet again. Confronted with a language barrier, we simply smile at each other.

So it's not just me who's eager to explore. Now I can't stop imagining what's on the other side. I dig my sandals out of my pack and peel off my sweaty socks and shoes. Rolling up my pants, I slowly step into the water. It's not so bad at first and Garrett follows me in. But as I get deeper the cold starts to gnaw at my toes and ankles. It may be almost 90 degrees outside, but even in the desert, water that remains cast in shadows will always be frigid. Defeated, we back out and unpack our lunch.

It can't be that bad I tell myself while I eat my PB&J. But maybe it could be. My mind, used to conquering me with an exhaustive list of worst case scenarios, starts churning: *Who knows how deep it is, or what sharp rocks are strewn along the bottom. And it's dark in there. Remember the trash compactor scene from Star Wars? Who knows what's in that water? Plus it's cold, too cold for you to make it to the end. Forget it.*

From somewhere deep within me, a voice speaks up, reminding me that I came here looking for a challenge, didn't I? To find a part of myself I had lost? Well, maybe that part of me is waiting on the other side of this cold, dark canyon.

Determined, I stand up and tug off my pants even though that leaves me standing in underwear I wasn't expecting to model in front of strangers today. I tug my shirt over my head and toss it aside. I then take a small dry sack, seal my camera inside of it, and clip it to the bandana around my neck. Here I proudly stand in the beautiful desert southwest, miles upon miles from civilization, a 35 year old woman in nothing but mismatched, fraying underwear and sports bra, sandals, aviators, and a ball cap with a camera tied around her neck.

I take my first timid step in. Then another. I'm cast in cool shadows and have no way to tell how deep the water will be six inches in front of me. The icy water creeps up to my knees, then my

thighs. I reach my arms out on either side and place my hands on the rough, cold sandstone walls for balance. My skin is burning as the cold water gnaws, then bites at my legs. It starts to hurt, so I turn and run out before I dare let the water reach the sensitive, tender skin on my stomach. The Russian men laugh with me, knowingly.

But I'm not done yet. So I slip back into the water, balancing myself again against the walls, feeling the uneven ground under my feet and focusing so I don't slip. The muscles in my thighs have tightened up and my toes are burning, but still I press on. The water slowly moves up my stomach and I gasp, the cold stealing my breath. But then something happens. My mind goes clear. The stinging cold has silenced my thoughts and I'm propelled forward simply by the fact that I'm doing this. Before long, it's too late to turn back. Suddenly the ground dips down and I stumble slightly. The water is now at my bra line, but blindly I push on, ignoring the tingling sensation that has numbed my legs and feet. Finally the ground rises up again and I rush quickly through the shallow water until I'm clumsily splashing out of the shadows and towards the warmth and safety of the sandstone on the other side.

I did it!

I jump and shout excitedly, blinking against the sunlight and taking in this private paradise I've brought myself too. The narrow slot canyon has opened up into a secluded sandstone bowl with walls, dappled with dusty green tufts of sage, gradually rising up 30 feet around me into the bright blue sky. To my left, cast in the shadow of a few small aspens, lies a pool of rainwater, the afternoon breeze carrying gentle ripples across its surface. My heart swells with awe. I've found Mother Nature's private zen garden.

I shout back to Garrett, promising him it's worth it. A few minutes later, clad in nothing but blue skivvies, he stumbles out of the water towards me, cursing against the cold. After a few jumps to get the blood flowing, he notices the pool and excitedly runs over to it, finding a cluster of tiny black tadpoles in the water. Filled by the spring rains, it's a temporary pool that will no doubt dry up in a few weeks, forcing the tiny tadpoles to mature quickly. But they've had millennia to figure out how. It's a reminder that life will adapt and persevere, even in the toughest of environments.

I expect the Russian men to follow us, but they don't, leaving Garrett and I alone in our little desert zen garden. I sun myself on the warm sandstone while Garrett busies himself with climbing over the boulders, surveying our temporary Eden. After a while we grow quiet, appreciating the beauty of this secret place that in a few weeks when the slot canyon dries out, won't be hidden anymore and will go back to being the dead end of a dry slot canyon.

With every position of the sun, every cloud, in every season, nature reveals a different iteration of her beauty and I thank the desert for allowing us a glimpse at this one. We decide to head back through the water and this time the cold is just as jarring, but knowing there are no hidden rocks or steep drop offs, we're able to navigate the water much more quickly. The sun has shifted behind the canyon walls now, offering us a shady spot to rest while we pull back on our clothes and shoes. Our Russian friends are gone and it's time for us to head down the trail too.

Back under the unforgiving afternoon sun, we trudge through the sandy wash and guzzle our water that by now is over half gone, thankfully making our packs much lighter. Garrett smiles and tells me that as I was wading alone through the slot canyon back there, one of our Russian friends had pointed to me, then flexed both of his biceps like a body builder. Strong woman.

An hour later when we climb out of the canyon to the trailhead parking lot, I pause to catch my breath by the sign I saw earlier today. But now the second sentence stands out to me:

*"Sculpted by wind, water, and time, these canyons safeguard opportunities for solitude and*

*personal discovery amidst a landscape of scientific wonder."*

I answered the desert's call to action and found the side of myself I was missing, waiting for me at the other end of that slot canyon. To face the wildness of this place and be better for it is to find inspiration to protect it. Now I, too, stand with Grand Staircase.