



The turtle sunned herself on the ledge above the water. Her shell grew warm and her toes relaxed against the rock. Her eyelids drooped. She sat still in the canyon where she belonged.

*

Emmy hated the beach. She hated the sand and the wind and the burning sun, the sharp edges of shells coupled with bare feet. She hated the salt. Salt in water was unnatural, but she never said so aloud. She never told anyone how much she hated smiling and planning and packing and cheering the whole family through every seaside vacation or how much she resented cleaning out the car and the sandy luggage afterward.

When they were small, she told the children not to use the word hate, but there were no children on this sand bar or anywhere within dozens of miles so she sat on her folded-over sleeping pad and allowed the word hate to bounce around inside her head.

Hating the beach was just the tip of Emmy's hating iceberg. She also hated piano recitals, athletic events, clothes shopping—especially with teenagers—watching fireworks from the back deck with the bugs in July and the bitter cold on New Year's Eve. She hated serve-yourself continental breakfasts in hotel lobbies with those idiotic beeping waffle makers and people who didn't clean the garbage out of their cars.

She leaned against the backpack she had carried all day. She was, indeed, sitting in the sand, but it was beside a creek in the bottom of a canyon in the desert rather than on a beach washed by waves. Still, it was like a beach, and she'd only eaten half her dinner before she'd accidentally swiped sand into her plate of food. It was possible that she would starve to death in the night.

The other women in the group were scattering for the mandatory evening silent hour, up and down canyon, journals and books tucked under their arms. The last thing Emmy wanted was to be silent. Sometimes she thought she'd been silent her whole life, never saying anything of note.

Emmy had agreed to come on this hike with her best friend Joni and several other women when she found out that her husband, Richard, was not having an affair. He was in love with the new nurse on the third floor and they played tennis together, but he explained his practical reasons for not sleeping with her to Emmy. Emmy had not cried.

Tennis. That was another thing she hated.

She had not cried or even said much at all to Richard about his confession, but she had written an email to Joni that said, "I'm in." Then she had gone shopping at the hiking store.

One of Richard's reasons for remaining faithful was the children. Brett was smart and busy and tall. He and Rich had long debates about the empty seat on the Supreme Court. They spoke as if Emmy was too dumb to understand, using words like *cloture*. Emmy looked it up. *Cloture* meant *closure*. So why not just say *closure*?



Emmy had imagined starting this hike feeling like a bad-ass wild woman. Joni's emails, describing the experience as an off-trail, canyoneering, all-women, extreme hike, four nights in the wilderness had made her sit up straighter at her desk, breathe more deeply, walk with longer strides as she went to the kitchen to eat things like raw red bell peppers dipped in

h u m m u s .
P o w e r
foods, rich in
antioxidants
but not
calories.

She had known she could do the hike, but she'd thought that she'd feel strong. On the first day, as the group struggled to

lift their packs, as everyone started walking, laughing at each other's faces as they felt the weight and the burden of what they had voluntarily shouldered, she hadn't felt like a bad-ass wild woman. She hadn't felt powerful. She had felt like a turtle, a cumbersome, slow-moving turtle, capable of lumbering along for miles and for years. She'd felt like herself. Heavy. Boring. Soldiering on. Doing yet another task. Carrying what needed carrying. And that was two days ago.

Piggy had called from college to encourage her to do the hike. Her name wasn't actually Piggy and no one called her that anymore, but sometimes in her thoughts, Emmy slipped. She remembered Alex as a toddler, all fat cheeks and braids that stuck out from her head.

Alex had brought her car home at semester and left it. She told Richard to sell it, that she had been riding her bike to class and catching rides with friends to the store. They called it co-ping. She carried her own ceramic coffee cup everywhere and a refillable water bottle. She also left behind

the Keurig coffee brewer Emmy had bought her for Christmas, something nice for her apartment, on the top shelf of the closet in her old bedroom. She said it clogged the landfills and wasn't a sustainable practice. And what was even worse, she had explained to Emmy how some women use flannel pads for their time of the month. Flannel pads that they had to wash. And what she really wanted for Christmas was money to buy a good supply of those pads. Emmy had seen the words "eco-conscious" in print, but never before heard someone actually say them.

And Alex had a tattoo. Some symbol of the three stages of being a woman. Girl, mother, drone... something like that.

Now, here on this sandbar, Emmy cried without sound, not breaking the silence that had descended into the evening. Only the chip-chip-chipping of a hummingbird high on juniper sap added a grace note. She cried for all of the things she hated and all of the moments when she had not said a word.

She also hated yoga.

A flicker flew from the saguaro above the cliff.

She never felt graceful or elegant. Her stomach was always in the way.

She'd been the first to arrive at the airport on the night everyone assembled for the hike. Joni had hugged her and said, "You are my rock. I know you can do this and that I won't have to worry about you. You are going to be so much help. Sally is terrified of sleeping outside, and Danielle is afraid of slowing us all up. Trina doesn't know anyone but me, and I know you'll help her feel like part of the group. I need someone to be the uncomplaining rock, and you have been that for me. For years, you have been that for me!"

The women began to move back toward camp, and Trina dragged her sleeping mat to the center so she could lead the evening yoga. Emmy did not stand, did not move from her spot. A huge bubble of rebellion rose in her throat and weighted her down as if with stone. She thought of all of the times through the years when she had wished she could get so ill that the doctors would put her in the hospital. She would lie there in a private room on white sheets and rest, have someone else bring her food. Have someone else launder and scrub and plan and keep records and make decisions. It was a silly fantasy; who dreams of getting sick? But it was better than the other recurring image that floated through her mind... one of vomiting—a huge stream of pent-up garbage flowing from her mouth, all over the world around her. She imagined vomiting out every word that she had thought but not said aloud. Acidic, smelly, hurtful—all of them exiting from the pouch at the back of her throat.

From her place cross-legged on her mat, mired in rebellion for what might have been the first time in her life, Emmy watched the other women as they moved through the poses, silhouettes against the sky as it faded from blue to gray to a mixture of pink and gold. When Trina began her soft speech about posture, Emmy straightened her spine. The women looked like birds, moving on wings through the air. Not turtles. Not salty-faced turtles who were sitting things out. The most elegant of the birds was Trina—long-limbed with a tiny waist and jet black hair with no gray. And decorated. Trina was decorated on almost every inch of skin that Emmy could see. Out there in front of God and everyone in a slim black tank top and hiking pants, barefoot on her sleeping pad, tattoos shining in the evening sun as if she wasn't ashamed of them at all.

After yoga, the rekindled supper fire surrounded by rocks boiled another pot of water. Emmy rose from her stone posture to make a cup of tea with two gingersnaps on the side. Emmy knew that if she'd had the box of cookies, she'd have eaten every one. These were rationed cookies. Two small cookies per night, per woman, carried into the wilderness away from the excess of supermarkets. Maybe they tasted better because she knew she couldn't reach for more. In her imagination she could hear the rustling sound the box would make in a dark kitchen.

She settled onto her mat and picked up the warm tin cup. Orange. The tea tasted orange.

*

The morning was gray when she woke, stiff and alert. She had not starved to death in the night. Emmy hated the brushing, swishing sound

her pack made as she hunted around for her toiletries bag, disrupting the silence of sunrise. Peeing in the dirt, gathering sticks to build a fire...these

It was a silly fantasy; who dreams of getting sick? But it was better than the other recurring image that floated through her mind...

simple tasks were beginning to seem routine. One more night and they'd be back where a barista could send a Flat White across the counter with the brand name prominent on the disposable cup. Perhaps it wasn't so silly to limit the amount of waste she generated. Alex would be thrilled.

Emmy sat on a stone beside the morning music of the creek, subdued, it seemed, to keep from waking the whole world. She took off her sleeved shirt and knelt beside the stream, brushing her teeth. She filled both hands with cold water and, for the first time in her life, splashed it with abandon on her face—once, twice, three times. She'd seen her son do this in the mornings and it seemed unpleasant and male. She dried off with a blue bandana and crept back to her spot on the sand. The other women were stirring around, building fires, and walking off into the bushes. Emmy curled up on her pad again, shoving her sleeping bag to the side.

She rubbed face cream into her skin and tried not to cry again. She'd soaked the knees of her hiking pants when she knelt beside the creek. She wasn't graceful about anything, and now her pants were wet.

As Trina faced the sun and softly said, "Mountain pose," every kink began to exit Emmy's limbs like shadows chased by the sun. Sun salutation seemed the right phrase. A salute. She closed her eyes as she lifted her arms into the sky and remembered how the women had looked the night before. Suddenly she was a bird, a bird with long graceful wings moving against the blue rather than rooted in the sand. All of sudden it wasn't about her belly or the shape of her thoughts, but about her soul as her muscles gave it wings.

The knees of her pants were dry by the time Trina said, "Namaste."

*

"... today we have to swim about 80 yards. We will reach the slot with water from side to side in midafternoon so it will be a relief from the heat. Tonight is our last night... yes, you can cheer." Laughter. "Today's hike will be shorter than yesterday's. I think you are going to love where we camp about an hour above the swim. We'll get going in ten minutes while there is still some cool left." Joni's eyes touched each woman in the group.

Emmy's yoga wings melted in the midday sun. She trudged forward, a turtle once more, bent under the weight of her pack. The canyon stretched ahead, one white boulder after another, no good place to put her feet. Earlier in the day someone had seen a caterpillar being eaten by ants, and Sally had pointed out an oriole's nest, a plain, yellow brown basket high up in a cottonwood tree. There had been a bear track in the mud the day before, but now all Emmy could see was the long expanse of white rock. One step at a time.

Maiden, mother, crone. That was it. Those were the three stages. She supposed crone was a negative image for most, but as she took one step after another, she thought maybe a crone carried wisdom instead of milk. She felt her breasts and belly grow heavy with the idea.

The pool did, indeed, stretch from straight up rock wall to straight up rock wall. The women searched for places to drop their packs amid the boulders and as one, turned toward Joni for instructions. Two women were assigned to blow up the swimming pool floats. The pink and blue plastic looked garish and out of place as the water murmured in and out of the pool and saguaro arms reached up from the cliffs, not unwelcoming so much as protective—Mother Nature doing her sun salutations whether anyone was here to see Her or not.

Emmy put her cell phone and headlamp in the dry sack when it came around. The other women had been taking photographs with their phones, but she hadn't turned hers on. She didn't care to document her stubby figure in hiking clothes that she had thought were elegant when she bought them. The slacks didn't do anything to camouflage her belly or her ass, and she had chosen a flowing floral shirt that drifted away from her waist. The other women wore tank tops and fitted shirts that hugged their bodies. She hoped Joni would share her photographs of the bird nests and tracks and the Gila monster they had seen between the rocks earlier.

"Remember that you will want everything dry on the other side. If you dump your pack in the drink, there is no guarantee we can get it out. I'm not trying to scare you, but you'll be on the other side with no shoes, no clothes, no pack. A disaster." Emmy looked down

the stretch of water to the shining sand and waving grasses at the other end. No way was she going to arrive there with no shoes. She pulled an industrial trash sack from the bottom of her pack.

She wondered later how she had gone through all of the emails, all of the discussions, all of those days of hiking and not realized that she'd be expected to swim with no clothes on. Nude. During Joni's orientation she'd spoken about this swim and the possibility of another, though the other had turned out to be wading with their pants cuffed up above the knee, hiking boots hanging by laces from their packs.

The tears that had flown away during yoga came back to clog her throat as she realized that the stupid clothes she bought for too much money at the stupid hiking store were all she had with her. She turned her back to the stupid pool. Her anger was not hot. It was cold. It froze up every bit of care she had in the world. After a moment, it even froze her tears.

Emmy hadn't realized there was a breeze until she felt it across her back, until it turned the empty space where her bra strap had rested into a band of chill. The sun felt strange on her skin. Undressing was for indoors. The first two women wrestled their packs onto the front of the floats, bending over awkwardly in the shallows. Joni waded back and forth, helping them get balanced.

"Rest your torso on the float, keeping it level, and kick across. Put your packs on the shore and then bring the floats back to the rest of us." She went almost to the middle of the pool with them before swimming back to where the other women waited, glaring white in the desert sun. Joni had a runner's body, but Emmy guessed that by magazine standards it wasn't perfect. None of the bodies beside the pool were perfect. They looked vulnerable, like plucked chickens in the butcher case. Only Trina didn't look naked. Emmy didn't pretend to know how some of that ink got in some of those places.

When it was Emmy's turn, the pool lapped cold around her thighs and

she couldn't imagine being fully in its embrace. When Joni rested her hand on her shoulder, Emmy wanted to scream at her friend that it wasn't polite to touch a naked woman—it was obscene. She felt her breasts almost touching her belly, and she hated every moment of this hike. Emmy even hated Joni.

"The water is fine! You are going to love it. And this float can stay on the other side. I'll get Trina to bring hers back across. We only have my pack left so stay over there and play."

Emmy could see that the women who were already across had abandoned their packs on shore and were back in the pool.

The water was cold and dark. Emmy hated that she couldn't see the bottom. The float made a slurping sound when it slid against her bare skin. The cliffs on either side seemed to close in, and she kicked her feet harder. She was in the center of the pool when she wanted to stop. This was so much easier than hiking. She had the crazy thought that maybe she would just stay right there in the middle of the water and take a nap—float for a while. Something bumped against her ankle and she began kicking again, frantically. The float scraped the sand, and Emmy stood up.

The wet naked women were laughing, playing like children in the water. Emmy had only been skinny dipping one time in her life and that was on her honeymoon. She and Richard had taken a cruise, and late one night a whole group of people, drunk, of course, and mostly old, had taken off their clothes poolside. She had whispered to Richard that they should leave, but he had said, "Oh, come on, Emmy. Be a good sport." So she had. She had been a good sport. She had been a good sport from then on, for the rest of her life.

Sand coated Emmy's feet and legs as she struggled to lift the tied-up garbage sack full of backpack off the slippery float and stash it among the tall grasses. She walked back into the water. Joni and Trina and the other float were already on their way back over. Emmy waded into the deeper water shuddering when she thought of whatever had bumped her leg. The water lifted her breasts. It had been a fish. A small fish. She watched a few of them moving along the bottom of the pool, away from the commotion of the women. She swam out to the dark water, making herself breathe deeply, and turned over on her back. Her wings returned. She felt like a child, a child who could fly. She ducked beneath the surface and sank to the bottom. Fish bumped her thighs and her arms. All she could hear were bubbles escaping slowly from her nose. Her hair lifted from her scalp to float upward. No one cries underwater.

Joni pulled her all-natural bio-degradable, no-bad-stuff soap from her pack and said now was a good time for everyone to bathe. They had about an hour more to hike, but it was upstream and this was the best bathtub they'd have until tomorrow night when the hike was over. Emmy stood beside Trina in the waist deep water and tried not to stare at the scrollwork around the other woman's ribcage. It was elegant, complicated. There was a hummingbird on the mound of her breast, dipping down as if to drink from the nipple. Emmy blushed and ducked under the water to rinse the suds from her hair. When she came back to the surface, Trina offered the tiny bottle of soap again.

"No, thank you. I've had enough." She looked at Trina's arm. "Is that a turtle?"

"Yes! She's not one of my totem animals, but she's so beautiful. Don't you think?" Trina extended her elbow. Emmy reached with one finger to touch the turtle that had feathery eyelashes and a gentle smile. For the first time, she understood the term *body art*.

The evening's camp was under towering sycamore trees with roots lifted like bent knees all around them. A deep green pool rested in the shadow of the cliff. Emmy chose a root that cupped her pack like a backrest. During silent hour, she did not write in her journal. She did not read her book. She sat perfectly still while a pool of calm gathered on the back of her neck at the base of her skull. She couldn't remember ever feeling a pool of calm there before. She sat amazed at how her pack with sleeping pad as both recliner and bed had become a precious home, a living

She sat amazed at how her pack with sleeping pad as both recliner and bed had become a precious home, a living space, everything she needed, at least for now. Enough. Perhaps the pool of calm was a result of the simplicity she had hoisted on her back and carried all of this way. It felt like a religion.

space, everything she needed, at least for now. Enough. Perhaps the pool of calm was a result of the simplicity she had hoisted on her back and carried all of this way. It felt like a religion.

She did yoga in her tank top, not caring so much that her belly rested in rolls at her waist. She was

a bird again, this time with roots for feet, roots that went to the center of the earth.

The women moved about, gathering wood for their last fire, their last supper from the last of the pouches they'd carried. Tomorrow's packs would be light. Emmy put her last tea bag and her last two gingersnaps aside for later. She knew that she should be ready for the hike to be over as she listened to the chatter around her about showers and plans to put on dresses and go out to dinner the next night. "Martini!" shouted Danielle and everyone laughingly placed their drink orders. When it came around to Emmy, she said, "Oh, just a glass of wine will suit me. I'm a lightweight." When it

was Trina's turn she said, "Water with lemon. I don't drink. I am a recovering alcoholic." Emmy wondered what it would be like to say something like that out loud.

"And I am a recovering backpacker," said Danielle. "Not to make light, Trina, but I'm quitting. Tomorrow, of course."

"And I am a recovering trip leader!" Joni shouted, while everyone laughed.

It went around the circle again while Emmy kept her gaze on the turtle she had spotted—a turtle with a yellow necklace that sat still and quiet at the bottom of the cliff on a ledge of rock right above the surface of the green pool.

"I am a recovering Fearful Franny," said Sally. "Your turn, Emmy."

Emmy walked to the edge of the water. "I am a recovering good sport."

The turtle looked her right in the eye before slipping off the shelf with barely a splash.

The turtle's legs became water wings. She became a bird. She became a fish. She became a totem. She became a bad-ass wild woman. She became a crone full of wisdom instead of milk.

She was everything.

AMY AUKER writes about the real world where things grow up out of the ground, where the miracle of life happens over and over again. She is the author of *Rightful Place*, *The Story Is the Thing*, and *Winter of Beauty*.

