

[NOT] GETTING RELIGION IN THE GRAND CANYON

THE AUTHOR, ULTRARUNNING
LEGEND CONNIE GARDNER
AND THE ENIGMATIC LANCE
ARMSTRONG BOND ON
A DESERT ADVENTURE



By Jenn Shelton
Photos by Ken Etzel



IT BEGINS WITH A TEXT
EXCHANGE.
**I NEED AN ADVENTURE,
TEXTS CONNIE.
GRAND CANYON? I RESPOND.
OK, BUT NOT RIM-TO-RIM
AGAIN.
HOW'S MARK?
MARK WHO?**

IN TRUTH, it begins with a break up.
Followed by a text.

For the better part of a decade, Connie Gardner and I have tempered our tumultuous love lives by meeting up across the country for trail-running adventures. The protocol is always the same: we decide on a place to run, she flies in from Ohio and—depending on the mechanical condition of my car—I either drive or fly in from whatever mountain town I'm living in. Between the two of us we can count on at least one trip a year, upwards of three in a bad year. As riddled with drama as our romantic relationships are, so follow our trail runs.

We've nearly killed ourselves searching for quicksand in Death Valley, only to find out later from a scientific source that there is no possibility of quicksand in Death Valley. (We still fight about who came up with that idea.) We've run for 48 hours without food in California's John Muir Wilderness, during which we had synchronized hallucinations—everything from black panthers to elaborate yurt villages to cheese omelets lying in the middle of

the trail. We've gotten so lost, so many times, that we now carry a whistle. Not a map and compass, because those aren't nearly as fun.

SHE CALLS ME "LIL' Thumper" and I call her my "Great Ox." Her trail name is less a jab at her broad, linebacker shoulders than a term of endearment. Even though she lives at sea level in Medina, Ohio, Connie can muscle through any mountain terrain, without training for altitude or elevation. Clocking in at exactly 20 years my senior, Connie pulls her seniority card to claim the lead on every one of our runs. Although you'd never guess it from her running resume—over the course of her ultrarunning career she's won 14 national-championship titles, and, in 2012, at the age of 49, set the American record for 24 hours—she suffers from arthritis and prefers to stay in front on the trail so she doesn't have to watch me, as she says, "Hop up and down rocks like an obnoxious, bunny-rabbit asshole."



The team (left to right): Jenn Shelton, Lance Armstrong and Connie Gardner.

I'm always happy to follow, never ceasing to be amazed at her consistent pace. Whether we're climbing a 14er or descending a scree field, she bulldozes across trails, chugging along with the belabored efficiency of a push lawn mower, my young legs spinning behind in a faster, easier gear, two springing steps to her every grinding, boring one.

Trail running may be our self-medication, but that doesn't mean we take it too seriously. We spend our runs talking trash and joking and bickering like sisters, never indulging in any talk therapy, which is how we both prefer it. We aren't looking for metamorphosis, only release.

Connie and I love and need the outdoors as much as anyone; the trails are our sanctuary, but much in the way that recess is a sanctuary for a kid.

I run with Connie because she's never going to feign a religious experience alongside a mountain sunrise. She's not going to cry at the sight of a dew-covered meadow or write a premeditated pious quote in a summit register. We've summited enough peaks together to know that most are cold, windy and miserable places to linger. Anyone who says that they are pillars of enlightenment is either a liar or a damn fool.

With Connie I know we will simply run wild and tough through wild and tough places. No proselytizing or overanalyzing. In our adventures we're only looking to laugh and to tire ourselves out. To run outside in a world that is too big to talk about.

All planning transpires completely over text, in a metaphor-heavy language that no one else would

understand, one that we've developed over the years, like a secret handshake. I know she's serious when she sends me a picture of a box of Oreos. Before they are launched in a national market, limited-edition Oreos are first crowd tested in Ohio. Every breakup gets a new flavor profile.

<<Pic of Root Beer Float Oreos>>
There's a trail called Havasupai. I got a guidebook. Thirty-six miles. Is it technical?
Not at all.
I can't risk twisting my ankle.
I just said it's not technical. I wish they'd make Mountain Dew Oreos.
That would be too perfect. The world would implode.

AT 36 MILES ROUND trip, it is our shortest adventure to date. Connie has to compete in the 24-hour World Championships in Italy the following week and doesn't want to do anything over 50 miles, lest it tire her legs. I personally wouldn't run anything over an hour the week before my target race of the year, but Connie isn't human. She's a stock animal. If I were a better friend, I would convince her to take a rain check on this little expedition. But I'm not a better friend.

I've been hearing about Supai (population: 639), a mythical Indian village nestled deep inside a southern tributary of the Grand Canyon—accessible only by horse or foot—for too long to pass up a chance to run there while it was still off the main radar for tourism. I'd descended into the “big

ditch” many times from the traditional jumping-off point in Grand Canyon Village, an outdoor mecca that sees five million visitors a year, and I'd grown weary of yelling, “On your left!” to heat-exhausted hikers who either move to the left and nearly bump me off a cliff, or turn around and chuckle, “What are you running from?” or some other salutation non-runners seem to think are hilarious in their originality, though we've all heard them a thousand times.

The access point to Supai is from Hualapai Hilltop, 191 miles from the circus, and this remote trailhead, regulated by the Havasu tribe (Ha means “water,” vasu means “blue green” and pai means “people”), allows a much-more-reasonable 25,000 visitors annually. From the hilltop you descend eight miles to the village and from there the trail follows milky-blue creeks and sapphire waterfalls taller than Niagara Falls, all the way down to the Colorado river—or so I've heard. I've never known anyone who has run past the big waterfalls. I have a guidebook that says there's a trail all the way to the confluence with the Colorado, but it's a canyoneering guidebook, and “trail” in those circles can mean anything. I tell myself that this trail is just what Connie needs to get her head straight before the Worlds.

I know that Connie will be grumpy if the trail is rocky, and I have a good hunch that the trail is probably not well maintained in the eight miles past the waterfalls to the river. We need a buffer, another person to come along, someone Connie respects, so she will have to be on her best behavior and not yell at me if things get dicey. A



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person who will fit in: someone who won't want to talk about feelings, a person who will appreciate the canyon without needing to wax poetic about the beauty. An irreverent asshole like ourselves.

Can I invite Lance?
Jenn. Nobody believes that you are friends with Lance Armstrong.
I'm inviting him.
Sure you are.

WE PULL UP to the Grand Canyon Caverns Inn at dusk. Dinosaur

sculptures two stories high are littered across the property—bright green Stegasauruses, sad relics from the era of lead-based paint. The address is Mile Marker 115, Route 66. There's no town, and the adjacent convenience store and—most tragically—watering hole that accompany the motel are closed this early in the spring. Behind the lobby is what looks to be about 50 barracks, a row of concrete blocks with doors standing maybe seven feet high. We've pulled into an abandoned carnival in the middle of the desert.

“We are not staying here,” says Lance.

“It's the closest hotel to the rim. And I already paid.”

“Connie, this bitch is crazy if she



I RUN WITH CONNIE BECAUSE SHE'S NEVER GOING TO FEIGN A RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE ALONGSIDE A MOUNTAIN SUNRISE. SHE'S NOT GOING TO CRY AT THE SIGHT OF A DEW-COVERED MEADOW OR WRITE A PREMEDITATED PIOUS QUOTE IN A SUMMIT REGISTER.

thinks we are staying here. Am I right?”

“She wants us to catch a disease.”
Lance and Connie met for the first time this morning at the Phoenix airport, but during the four-hour car ride to the canyon they bonded enough to create an endlessly fun game of ganging up on me. We unload our gear and Lance joins us in our hotel room.

“Connie, you're the only one I can trust here. Tell me what I need to bring on this trail.”

Connie looks down at her bed, a jumble of gels, socks, Oreos and unsorted gear. She picks up a small spray can called Tri-Glide and tosses it to Lance.

“You're gonna need this. The spray is better than the lotions.”

“Where am I supposed to spray it?”

Connie looks at Lance like he's the biggest idiot to ever walk the face of the earth. “On your balls.”

“Ball,” Lance corrects her.
“Huh?” Connie asks.
“Ball.”

Connie still doesn't get it. Lance has to fill her in about what he has affectionately dubbed Juan Pelota, JP for short. It's a play on words, the surname being the Spanish word for

ball. It's also the name of the coffee shop connected to the bike shop he owns in Austin.

ONCE WE HAVE OUR packs and anatomy sorted out, we drive 40 miles down the road to Peach Springs, for something to do. For beer. There's a nice hotel in Peach Springs, and it even has a pool, meaning that the Grand Canyon Cavern Inn's claim to be the “closest accommodations to the Hualapia Hilltop” is a flagrant lie. We are in the Wild West, where reliable information is variable at best.

We are not sure if we will even be able to start the run tomorrow. My guidebook says we can buy our trail permits once we descend into Supai village, but the receptionist at the inn warned us that permits are reservation only and we'll be turned around at the trailhead by the tribe before setting one foot into the canyon. Seeing that there is a hotel closer to the trail than ours makes me confident that Grand Canyon Caverns Inn is full of shit, and that we will be fine with buying permits tomorrow. I voice this vote of confidence.



Armstrong, incognito.

let her know I was headed to Austin for the next few months to finish a book project.

“But, sweetie, do you know anyone who lives in Austin?”

“Not really. But I texted Lance Armstrong, and he agreed to be my training partner.”

A pregnant pause followed. When she finally spoke, she didn’t ask any of the obvious questions: how I’d come to know Lance, or why he’d be slumming it with the likes of me, or how the book was coming along (she knew better than to ask), or how I was going to survive away from the mountains, or—tragically—if I needed to borrow any money for the move.

Instead, she whispered, “But sweetie, how can he keep up with you? Doesn’t he only have one leg?”

Lance declined the offer to join us after learning that most of the huts along the route only had communal sleeping options. To make up for not joining us, he instead hosted a party for us and all of our guests at his house the night before we left Aspen.

WE WERE IN HIS kitchen, and it was late. I was drunk. Everyone was, but everyone had left. We’d polished off a bottle of mescal, and then the guests had gone to their hotels to get some rest. All that remained were Lance, Anna—Lance’s stunningly beautiful and gracious girlfriend—Rickey and myself. Lance opened a bottle of white wine, but after one sip decided he didn’t like it. He moved on to red. I was reminded of those times at fancy restaurants when they let you taste the wine and decide if you like it. I’d always wondered if anyone ever actually turned up their nose and sent the wine back. Was Lance, with his down-home Texas accent and good-natured smile, one of those people?

I parked myself beside the discarded wine and poured myself a glass, telling myself it was possible that the discarded wine in my hand was worth more than my car. Of course, a blue book was probably worth more than my car, so that wasn’t saying much.

I was completely out of place in the multi-million-dollar home in Aspen, as I was at the time actually living out of my aforementioned car for the summer and couldn’t remember my last shower. I was blind drunk and under the bright kitchen lighting was suddenly self-conscious of the dirt under every single one of my fingernails. I tried to politely listen to the conversation between Lance and Rickey, who were recounting a recent 26-mile run they had done together called the Four Pass Loop, a classic Aspen trail run. But really I wanted to disappear into the folded-down back seats of my car, do a quick wet-wipe bath of my important pieces and get some rest before six long days of work.

“Are you a fast runner?” A slurred drawl shook me out of my reverie. I

I’D NEVER RUN WITH LANCE before moving to Austin, but I was fairly certain he would have very little trouble keeping up with me, even with a peg leg.

I knew he was a decent runner. Like the rest of the country, I’d watched him run his first marathon, a 2:59 in the 2006 New York Marathon. I remember his New York race clearly because at the time I was working at a specialty running store and we started a pool to predict his time. Always the optimist, I bet on 2:20 or faster, and became 15 dollars poorer in the process.

But had I known that New York was one of the worst performances of his life—had I known that he was a 15-minute 5K runner in high school, or that at the age of 40 he’d won the 2012 Ironman 70.3 Florida posting a 1:15 half-marathon, after averaging 28 mph on the bike—then I probably would have never asked him to run with me, a 1:20 half-marathoner on fresh legs. Two of them.

I was surprised that he had agreed to train with me, as I’d only met him once before, at a party in his home in Aspen last summer. It was my friend Rickey Gates who had introduced us. Rickey had invited Lance to join us for a hut trip that we were guiding, a six-day trip that started in Aspen and took runners 100 miles through the Rocky Mountains to Vail. A self-proclaimed “princess,”

“This is the last trip we let you plan,” says Lance, and Connie seconds his sentiment. The glee in her eyes makes me wonder what would make her happier: running the trail or watching me waste Lance’s weekend.

We decide that it will be safest to start our run before sunrise, before the tribe starts regulating the rim. It will be a 4 a.m. wake up from our current hotel, or 4:45 a.m. if we stay in Peach Springs.

Lance makes an executive decision and goes into the Peach Spring hotel to get us rooms while Connie and I wait in the car. He comes back shaking his head.

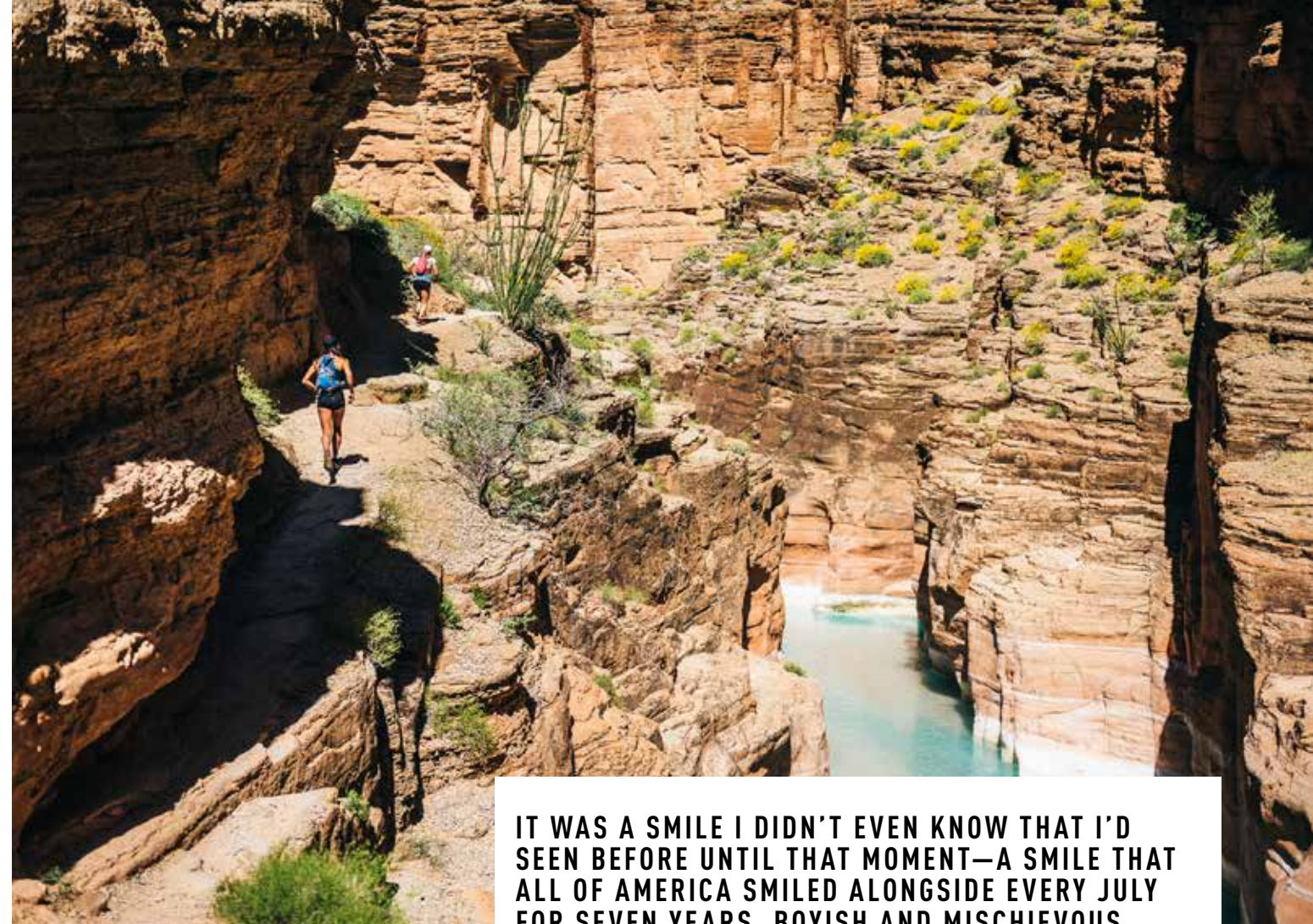
“No vacancy.”

“You couldn’t pull any strings?” asks Connie.

“I told you, ladies. I’m in disguise.” Lance has grown out a beard since I saw him last fall. He insists that his new beard, coupled with a ball cap, makes him unrecognizable.

That Lance believes a splotchy nest of facial hair lends him anonymity is an absurd delusion. He is one of the most famous people on earth, so famous that even my mother, a lady whose last celebrity crush was Pacey from “Dawson’s Creek,” knows his tale: from cancer survivor, to champion, to his latest fall from grace. Well, she knows the gist of the tale.

Early last fall I called my mom while driving south—she refuses to text—to



caption

IT WAS A SMILE I DIDN’T EVEN KNOW THAT I’D SEEN BEFORE UNTIL THAT MOMENT—A SMILE THAT ALL OF AMERICA SMILED ALONGSIDE EVERY JULY FOR SEVEN YEARS. BOYISH AND MISCHIEVOUS, RESTING BELOW A SET OF HARDENED BLUE EYES.

looked up from my wine. Was Lance talking to me? He was.

“Not really.”

“I don’t believe you.”

“When you ran your first marathon, I bet \$15 you would break 2:20. You ran 2:59.”

I don’t know where I was going with this, as social fluidity has never been my strong point. Maybe I was embarrassed to talk about my haphazard running career to someone who was once considered the greatest endurance athlete the world has ever seen? More likely I was still pissed, nine years after the fact, that he lost me 15 dollars. At least I didn’t ask him if he’d ever sent back wine in a restaurant.

“Give me five months and I could break 2:20,” Lance answered, not missing a beat.

I didn’t know what to do. Should I, a greasy girl with dirty fingernails, tell Lance Armstrong what I really thought: that there wasn’t a chance in hell he could do that at age 42?

Luckily, Rickey saved me.

“Six months, and if you lost 30 pounds.”

“Fifteen pounds,” said Lance.

“Thirty,” said Rickey.

Lance looked down at his belly [TK—so did he have a little gut?] and smiled. It was a smile I didn’t even know that I’d seen before until that moment—a smile that all of America smiled alongside every July for seven years. Boyish and mischievous, resting below a set of hardened blue eyes. A visage so unmistakable that no beard or baseball cap could ever disguise it. “Alright, 30,” he conceded.

IT’S A MOOT ARGUMENT whether Lance can run a 2:20 marathon, because he isn’t allowed on the starting line.

After being issued a lifetime ban from sanctioned races, including cycling, triathlons and road running,





TRAIL RUNNING IS THE ONLY SPORT THAT WILL ALLOW LANCE TO COMPETE, WHICH IS HOW HE CAME TO BE SLUMMING IT IN THE GRAND CANYON WITH NONE OTHER THAN LIL' THUMPER AND HER GREAT OX.

Lance has taken to trail running. Lacking an over-riding governing body that could issue a sweeping ban on competition, the trails offered a clemency of sorts. [TK—needs a bit more explanation. Is he racing, or just doing adventure runs Does he have any competitive goals?]

I've always loved the oddball community of trail running, a sport that opens its arms to dropouts and misfits and even shit shows like Connie and myself. It's a sport as American as the Emma Lazarus poem, "The New Colossus," found on the Statue of Liberty. *Give me your tired, your poor, Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free, The wretched refuse of your teeming*

shore. Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost, to me, I lift my lamp beside the golden door!

Fancy words aside, trail running is the only sport that will allow Lance to compete, which is how he came to be slumming it in the Grand Canyon with none other than Lil' Thumper and her Great Ox.

OF COURSE EVERYONE and their mother—except maybe mine—has an opinion on whether Lance Armstrong, or any convicted dooper, should be allowed

to compete in trail races. I've heard him called a philanthropist and a misanthrope, an inspiration and a disgrace, a tragic hero and a sociopath, a scapegoat and an evil mastermind. Diehard Lance fans believe his presence would bring more popularity to the fringe sport of trail running, but that argument makes me uncomfortable; I've never gone for a run and thought, "Gee, I wish this trail were more popular." Purists believe his presence would taint the very essence of trail running, but I've never met a purist who was any bit fun—which, to me at least, is the very essence of trail running.

Whatever someone's opinion about Lance, I don't expect, or want, to influence it. All I can say is that while I spent a miserable fall in Texas, sitting in the dark recesses of my imagination

working on a book, missing the mountains and my friends, the only bright spot of each day was our morning runs. All the runs were too fast and rarely lasted more than an hour. We didn't talk about book deadlines or 100-million-dollar lawsuits; we just ran and laughed and—like all my relationships—when our run ended we went or separate ways.

During my brief stint in Austin, which we referred to as "training camp," Lance would always choose the route and the pace, and of course he would always take the lead. I had a hard time keeping up, but it was my favorite type of running: I got to turn off my mind and follow the person in front of me. I'd never pay attention to the routes, but I'd know that a run was almost over when Lance would say his endearing line,



Clockwise from left: Havasupai Falls, the fateful downclimb, a helping hand, one for Insta.

"Bitch, Ima drop you right now." That signaled our finishing sprint. Although Lance will swear up and down that he doesn't have any speed, he outkicked me every single time except one. My one victory came after he showed up to the trailhead hung over, because he'd spent the night before drinking and playing poker with Willie Nelson. If I ever have the chance to meet Willie, I'm going to buy him a beer.

Lance Armstrong's name brings up a lot of different emotions to a lot of different people, but to me his name will always bring up the most sacred of all associations: a morning run before a miserable day of work.

DON'T TOUCH ME!" Connie yells, donkey kicking her heel free from my grip. She's facing the wall for better traction and can't see what she's doing with her feet, but if I didn't know better I'd swear she was aiming straight for my head.

"I am trying to help you," I scream back and grab her heel, which is lashing

wildly over the ledge and shove her toe into a solid foothold. I see her body relax, or as close as a person this gripped can get to relaxing.

The spray from the 206-foot falls has left us and the rock face we're descending drenched, and although she knows better than to look down, she can't help herself. Connie pries her face from the wall and cranes her neck to make her voice heard over the thundering falls. She looks panicked, a kitten in a bath—all claws and not one shred of reason.

"You knew about this didn't you, you little witch?"

"No," I say, and this time I am telling the truth. I had no idea the trail would be this awesome. "And you shouldn't yell at the person helping you."

"Did she know it would be like this?" Connie looks halfway up the cliff side to where Lance is standing on a railroad tie, one hand grabbing onto a notch in the wet slab and the other holding his phone.

"Girl fight," he says. "I gotta film this." We finally coax Connie down the cliff, one donkey kick and laborious foothold at a time. Havasu Falls, the showcase



Gardner heading back up, against traffic.

any of the cardinal directions, every time I see a cairn I use it as a chance to get in the water and cool off. Connie is visibly annoyed with the unmaintained trail, I'm melting and Lance is beginning to get hyper conscious of the total distance that we will have to run today, which now looks to be nearly 40 miles. He tells me the moment his GPS hits 18 miles, and we think we must be near the confluence of the Colorado, our halfway point. When his GPS hits 20 miles and still there's no sign of this canyon's end, I wonder if we should just turn around. It's not like we're climbing a mountain, we're descending an inverted one. There's no real sense of accomplishment in reaching the river.

"Don't follow me, it's deep here," I yell from the middle of the creek, once again fooled by a cairn.

"I ain't gettin' JP wet," Lance yells back. "Yo. Found the trail over here."

Instead of continuing down the trail, Lance wades out and offers a hand to pull me out of the creek, where I'm stumbling on the wet rock, trying to negotiate the current and make my way back to the shore. Connie plods by us at her metronome pace, taking the lead for the first time all day. The trail climbs up the canyon wall, and she disappears around a bend to the left. We've just gotten back onto the trail when we hear the shrill sound of victory.

"River!" Connie screams from above.

Lance and I can't believe it. For the past three miles we'd been sprinting around each turn in the trail, killing ourselves to be the first to spot the Colorado. Slow and steady—unfathomably—the Great Ox has won the race.

We reach Connie, who is stopped in the trail, ecstatic. "Look," she says, pointing down off the cliff. "It's beautiful."

She's right. The creamy blue water of Havasu Creek spits out of a narrow slot and into the roaring brown waters of the Colorado, two worlds colliding, twirling together in eddies of contrasting blue and brown. It's like mixing two perfect and opposing life forces, the elusive Mountain Dew Oreo finally come to fruition.

We scamper off the cliff and down to the river. We dive into the water like kids in a candy land. The water is shallower than it looks where I

of the trail, dumps 38 million gallons of blue-green water per day over her shores, creating a swirling wind chill at her bottom pools that—enshrouded by the steep canyon walls—is as ferocious as any summit winds I've ever felt. Immediately, I'm freezing, despite the 90-degree temperatures that have followed us down the canyon all morning.

"Turkey's done," Connie says, pointing at my chest. I suppose complimenting my nipple strength is her way of thanking me for helping her down the trail.

"In and out, ladies," says Lance who, coming from Texas, is also covered in goose flesh.

We leave the shores of the sacred waterfall without taking so much as a picture. We'll be back later in the day, and all of us are anxious to get to the river, to see what lies ahead. Lance has never run farther than 26.2 miles, Connie doesn't want to twist a knee and I don't want to get gang-blamed for whatever is about to go wrong.

into the village, the horses are worked hard, I'd been told, but it was still a harsh reality for a girl who winters in white-bred mountain towns.

It wasn't until a mile outside of town that we came across a brown horse lying on its side beside the trail, malnourished, breathing in shallow rapid bursts, abandoned to die. Connie squatted down beside the horse and softly stroked the white stripe on its nose, starting at its cowlick and ending at its flaring nostrils. Lance and I looked on in horror. I've always had some intellectual notion that paradise comes at a price, but I didn't know if I wanted to be the financial backer for this sort of abuse.

"We're not paying the permit fee on the way out," I said.

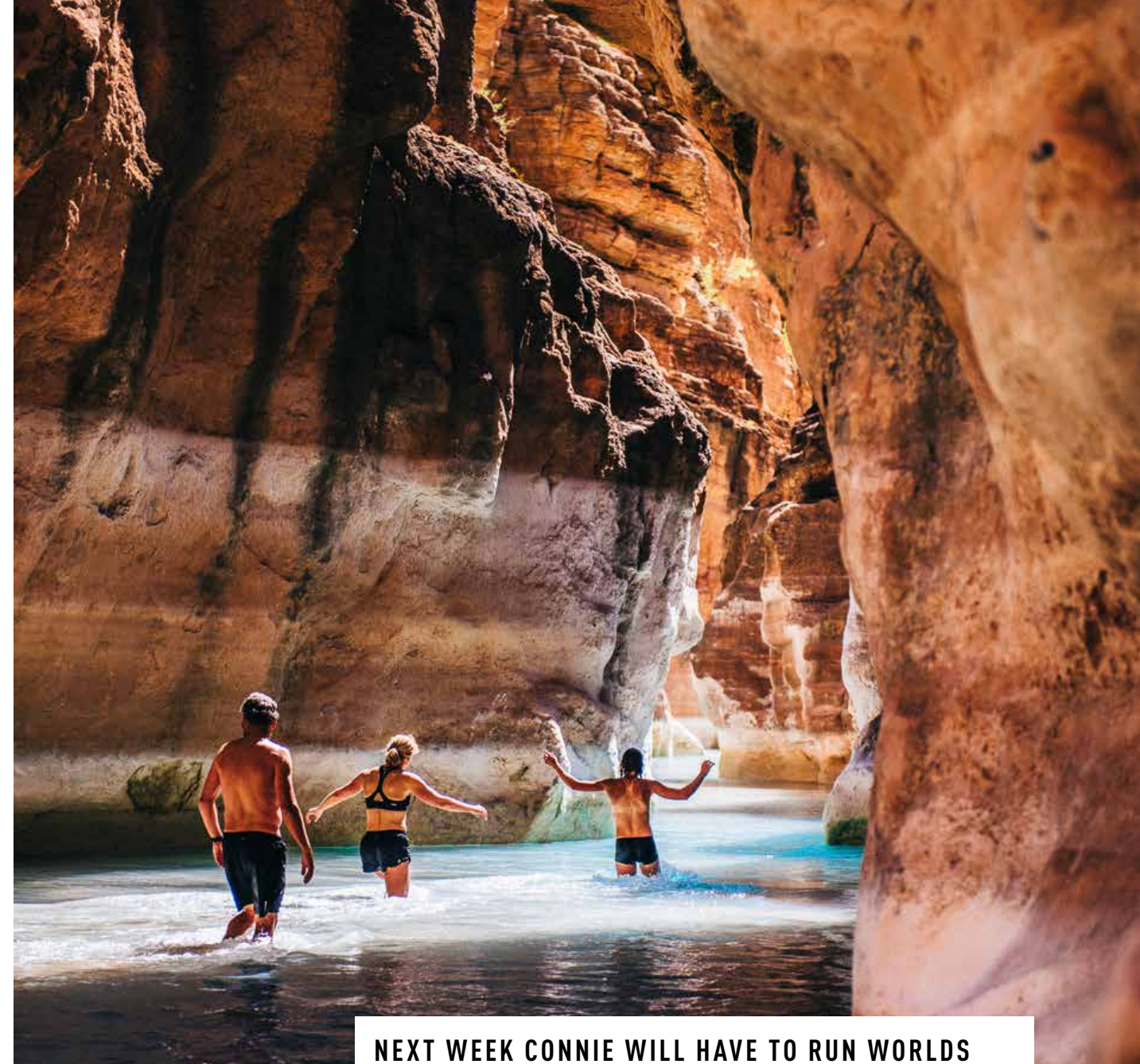
"Yes, we are," said Connie, still petting the horse.

Dispute settled.

NOW, SEARCHING FOR cairns in the deserted, overgrown slot canyon cut by a turquoise creek—miles past the fabled town with the famous waterfalls—the world of permits and animal abuse and book deals and grand-jury investigations and asshole boyfriends is all but erased. All that matters is staying on the trail and making it to the river. The cairns are our only guides, and, like everything in this distant part of Arizona, they provide conflicting, if not outright misleading, information.

We quickly realize that a stack of rocks could either signify that we need to cross the creek, or it could merely be a confidence booster, letting us know that we are on the right path. Since the trail markers could mean that we need to travel in essentially

UNTIL THE DRAMATIC drop down to Havasu Falls, the trail has been fairly smooth sailing, at least technically. We got an early enough start to avoid any permit issues at the Hilltop, and by the time we descended the 10 smooth miles to Supai Village, the shanty tourism office had yet to open for the day. We passed through the sleepy village without any issue, vowing to stop on the return trip and pay our \$80-a-piece entrance fees. I began to question whether I wanted to pay a permit fee as we passed pasture after pasture filled with horses whose ribs were protruding. Without any roads



The secret corridor.

choose to dive and I scrape my belly on the sand, bleeding. I don't care. No mountain summit has ever held this kind of excitement. We splash each other in the swirling waters, and then in four quick strokes Lance swims upstream, through the narrow slot and into the canyon. Connie and I take turns trying to swim through the slot where the creek water makes its final voyage before meeting the Colorado, but the current is too strong. I get scared that when the current spits us out, it will throw us all the way into the Colorado and we'll be swept down the river. The adrenaline gives me the strength to make it through. I wait on the other side for Connie to muscle her

NEXT WEEK CONNIE WILL HAVE TO RUN WORLDS ON TIRED LEGS, I'LL STILL HAVE AN UNFINISHED MANUSCRIPT AND LANCE WILL STILL BE CALLED A DISGRACE AND A SOCIOPATH.

way through the slot, and the moment I see her blonde ponytail I grab on and pull her into the calm sapphire pool that awaits on the other side.

We are in our own secret world, flanked by salmon-colored cliffs and the bluest water in the world. Lance is standing on a sun-bleached boulder, grinning. We still have to make the return trip home, over 20 miles back to the Haulapi Hilltop. Next week Connie will have to run Worlds on tired legs, I'll still have an unfinished manuscript and Lance will still be called a disgrace and a sociopath. But all that's past and

the future. Right now, for a few minutes, this tiny pool of blue is our home.

"This is the best day of my life," Lance says. "The best place on earth."

"Better than Champs-Élysées?" asks Connie.

"Way fucking better."

I can't tell if he's telling a flagrant lie or the truest of all truths. And out here in the wild American West, I've come to prefer it that way.

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