

O F F B E L A Y

LOST AND FOUND | LESLIE HSU OH

AS I BEGIN A free-hanging rappel thirteen stories off an overhang inside the Caverna do Diabo, my headlamp illuminates translucent ripples in calcite-rich draperies. The farther I descend into a cathedral of geological wonders, formed drip by drip over millions of years, the lower the temperature drops beneath the scowl of a naturally formed devil's face. Only the first 700 meters of this cave, one of the longest of hundreds of caves in Brazil's Vale do Ribeira, are artificially lit and paved. The rest has been mapped up to 9000 meters by Franciele dos Santos Satiro and other cavers. Now, Satiro is belaying me from below. Something brushes against my cheek. I flinch, and the motion upsets my balance. My feet swing higher than my head. The more I try to maintain control, the more I lose it.

"Everything OK?" Satiro asks after I unclip. She is the only woman to guide the entire Caverna do Diabo, a twelve-hour-long adventure requiring mountaineering and canyoneering skills. The owner of a guiding service, she once told me, "I am a woman who struggles every day in an industry that has many men, to show that women are capable."

I give her a thumbs-up. This is not the right time to explain that my mother's been on my mind, as I'm nearly the same age that she was when I lost her to cancer. She never had a chance to fly to São Paulo to photograph this cave or see the green-glowing, pinky-sized bioluminescent mushrooms in the remnants of the Atlantic Forest. Now, she's been dead for longer than the twenty-one years I spelunked and bouldered with her in nearly every North American national park, where she taught me how to compose photos to encourage dialogue and inspire change. In one of her best images, my brother and I wade through fields as high as our chests in Channel Islands National Park. Neither of us says anything as we gaze in opposite directions, settling down the beating of our hearts so we can hear the wind rattling blades of grass.

"What story am I trying to tell?" my mother used to ask me. The answer to this question changes as I age. She wanted us to listen to things that can't be said or to advocate for those who are silenced. When my Chinese relatives tell me that my mother would be disappointed with the "reckless" decisions I've made since her death—I abandoned medical school, joined a mountaineering club, married for love, and became a photographer and a nature writer—I wonder if her photos are simply her way of reminding me to stay faithful to my true self. Above me, filmmaker Josiah Holwick inches his way down the overhang. His headlamp beam strikes the marble at just the right angle to spotlight his silhouette in shades of burning embers. I snap several images. Using only my phone camera, I'm not expecting anything spectacular, but as I study the pictures, I know immediately which one my mother would have inspired: its composition evokes a feeling or message that can't be adequately translated into words.

Two hours later, we're all behaving like kids, sliding down marbled chutes into fathomless, clear blue-green waters where we

have to pull ourselves across with anchored ropes. Diving beneath rock features, we laugh so hard our stomachs hurt. At the turnaround point, I'm standing in a series of pools as deep as my chest, beneath the Devil's Throat Waterfall, which plummets with so much force that I can't lift my helmeted head and I don't feel my phone slip out of my pocket.

As I prepare to ascend, I realize that I lost my phone and with it, the photo. Satiro's colleague, Maicon Douglas, who specializes in cave rescues, removes his shoes and combs the rocky bottom of each pool with his bare feet. When I take off one canyoneering boot, the current wrestles it from my hands. Before anyone notices, I retrieve it and quickly follow Douglas through the waterfall. I can't see anything. When I try to come up for air, my helmet hits something hard. I swim forward and try to surface again, but I'm trapped underwater by a marble slab. Holwick grabs my hair and pulls me out before I run out of air. We blink at each other, digesting the thought that I risked my life for a photo. Someone says, "You scared me." The space around us seems to shrink.

Because I'd sealed the phone inside a waterproof pouch, Satiro promises that she'll return the next day with goggles, but everyone believes it's long gone, traveling through parts of the cave we didn't have time to explore. We trek back in silence through the riverbed, banging up our hands and knees while clambering over boulders and ascending rapids. I'm worried that this incident will only add to my relatives' belief that I'm irresponsible. How could I risk letting my children suffer from my death? Marina Santos Cruz, a guide who is pursuing a master's degree in archaeology, commiserates. "In Brazil outdoor activities are generally viewed as something masculine," she says. "Usually, women give up these activities to take care of kids or get married."

The next day, Douglas finds the phone in its pouch, still churning at the bottom of the waterfall. No one can believe that both the phone and the photo are undamaged. When my kids pick me up from the Reno, Nevada, airport on Halloween night, the eight- and sixteen-year-old burst into tears: the former tells me she thought she lost her best friend, and the latter says her peers think they are too old to trick-or-treat with her. In contrast, my five-year-old claims that everyone adores her.

I tear up because it's getting harder for my girls to be who they want to be. Trick-or-treating with children and adults dressed up in silly costumes reminds me of the moments of joy and abandon I felt in the cave. I don't know why we often lose our ability to be in the present moment as we age or our belief in miracles. All I know is that the story I'm trying to tell is what can't be seen in the photo: rain and river water absorbing carbon dioxide, turning into an acid that seeps through cracks and sinkholes, dissolves rock and forms new and unmapped pathways, restoring possibilities and wonder both scary and exhilarating. ■

