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Desert Sojourn: A Woman's Forty Days and Nights Alone

Debi Homes-Binney
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Faced with a failed marriage and an unfocused desire for a meaningful career, Holmes-Binney, inspired by Walden, decides to spend forty days alone in the Great Salt Lake Desert. Dressed in thrift-store cowboy boots, she arrives with sixty-two gallons of water, ziploc bags of chickpeas and rice, writing journals, minimal building supplies, and not much else. “I’m going to the desert because I wish to live deliberately,” she tells a supermarket clerk, paraphrasing Thoreau.

Her first night there, she encounters an unseasonal blizzard and nearly dies. Bret and Dana, the couple she’s asked to drive her out to the desert and back, rescue her by bringing much-needed additional supplies. After this, Holmes-Binney spends most of the remaining forty days in bed—miserable, cold, vulnerable, and fearful of the desert. Life becomes so arduous for her that tasks like straightening up the shelter and making a meal become occasions for self-congratulation. “I can take care of myself,” she reassures herself over and over again. Mostly, Holmes-Binney spends her time writing in her journals and reviewing the details of her life: during their first Thanksgiving together, her husband did not appreciate her resourcefulness when she made Cornish hens for their small family instead of turkey; it was an early sign of their incompatibility. She once took “wardrobe classes” for helpful hints in dressing, and was so petty that when she saw a woman with painted toenails under nylon stockings, she whispered to her young son “How tacky.” She dwells on personal details so mundane that they are familiar to all.

To her credit, Holmes-Binney is sincere in her desire to confront her fears and change her life. She successfully endures the forty days of solitude—no mean feat—and ends her stay with a celebration that is meaningful for her: she covers her shelter with holiday decorations, and names it “Candyland.”

Her experience, however, seems more endurance than inspiration. It is unclear what she has learned, other than that she is capable of “toughing it out.” Yet Holmes-Binney seems to have found her way. Today, she is a freelance writer and a tour director. She seems to have achieved the fulfilling life she so desires, and she credits much of her current satisfaction to her desert sojourn. (July

JILL BLUE LIN (July / August 2000)

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