

## Red Pepper Flakes

By Linda Lindahl

Dottie stood in front of her closet, wondering when her wardrobe had gotten so dark; black pants, black skirt, brown pants, navy skirt, charcoal pants, all of which were typically paired with longer blouses or sweaters, depending on the season. She was grateful for the extra length which covered her increasingly-bulging stomach. Menopause had done a number on her body, and Covid hadn't helped. Working remotely allowed her to wear elastic-waisted sweatpants, while snacking on Pringles and peanut M&Ms between Zoom calls.

She pulled the black pants from the closet, chose a vertically-striped blouse to go with them, and got dressed. She inhaled and grimaced while she pulled up the zipper. She grabbed a safety pin to help guarantee it would stay in place. The long blouse would provide added insurance against an embarrassing episode.

She grabbed a quick cup of coffee, a warmed-up cinnamon bun and the container with her packed lunch as she raced towards the front door.

She paused momentarily when she reached the side table, as she often did in the mornings, to glance at the 5x7 photo of her and Richard. The picture had been taken 14 years prior at a formal charity event. Richard had often rebuked her requests to get dressed up in their finest attire and have a special night out, but this charity event was hosted by his corporation and he was expected to attend. She had worn a bright red halter-neck gown with an intricately-beaded neckline that showed her toned arms. Richard looked regal in his peaked lapel tuxedo with the satin trim. This was the only remaining picture of the two of them left in the house. She just couldn't bring herself to remove it.

It had been almost three years since Richard left her. Most of the neighbors and acquaintances assumed he had met another woman. She almost wished that had been the case. He left because he was bored: bored with her, bored with their life together, bored of their suburban split-level home on a one-third acre lot – the same home that they had been so ecstatic to buy when they married 34 years ago; the same home where they had raised their three children. He claimed he was so bored “he ached deep in his bones”.

She arrived at work 10 minutes early, as usual. When she had graduated college years ago, her dreams hadn’t included being an administrative assistant to a middle manager in an insurance company. But she had taken many years away from her promising Marketing career to raise her children. She didn’t re-enter the business world until her youngest child, Patrick, was in high school, and by that time she hadn’t worked in almost 20 years. So, when she was offered this job ten years ago, she grabbed it.

Soon it was lunchtime, and she warmed her leftover chicken marsala. It had been Richard’s favorite and she still made it often. The only time he complained about it was the time, many years ago, when she decided to experiment and sprinkled red pepper flakes into the sauce. He had taken a large bite and nearly spit it out.

“What have you done to the sauce?” he choked. When she explained she was trying new things he exclaimed, “Please don’t ever do that again. You know how I like it!” And from then on, it was salt and pepper only.

Towards the end of the day, her boss Danny asked to see her in his office. Danny was nearly 25 years her junior and had only been with the company for six months. As she began to follow him, he caught her eye and said, “You should probably bring your purse.”

Perplexed, she went back to her desk to grab it and when she entered Danny's office, she noticed Linelle from HR sitting in the chair next to Danny's. Her heart began to race. This could not be good. He waved her to an empty chair, where she slowly sat down.

"Dorothy...", he began.

"Dottie," she interrupted. How many times did she need to correct him on her name?

After a long pause, he inhaled and began again, "Dorothy, I'm sorry but I have some difficult news. As you know, this has been a tough year for our company, and we are having to make cost reductions. Effective immediately, we are eliminating your position. Linelle is here to provide you the details of our separation and next steps."

The rest of the conversation was a blur. She heard none of it as she sat there in a haze. She was still in a fog as she drove home, feeling stunned and numb.

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Dottie put on a pot of coffee. It had been three weeks since the unceremonious termination of her admin job, and her friend Eileen had insisted on coming over. Dottie had held her off for a few weeks, not ready to talk to anyone, but Eileen had been unrelenting so she finally agreed to see her.

There was a knock on the door and Dottie opened it to find Eileen. Eileen gasped as she looked at Dottie, up and down.

"Oh no! This is worse than I thought!" she exclaimed as she brushed past Dottie.

"What are you talking about?" Dottie muttered.

"Well, it's 11:00, you're still in pajamas – which, by the way, have a coffee stain on the front - and when was the last time you brushed your hair??" she asked, as she pushed a few unruly strands off Dottie's face.

“Hmph!” Dottie mumbled, as Eileen poured herself a cup of coffee and patted the seat next to her for Dottie to sit.

“Listen, Dot, I’m worried about you. I know this layoff was a shock and must seem like awful news, but you can’t just become a recluse. This may sound strange, but maybe this is a blessing. Maybe this was all meant to be.” Dottie looked up in surprise. “Let me finish,” Eileen continued, “For years, all you’ve done is take care of everyone else: your husband, your kids, your boss. You have never made time for yourself. Maybe this is a sign to do something you’ve always dreamed of doing, have an adventure! Is there a class you’ve always been interested in? You know the community center has lots of interesting classes. They just added chair yoga on Thursday mornings! I could go with you! Or perhaps you could take a vacation that you’ve always dreamed of?”

Eileen paused as Dottie stared deep into her mug for what seemed like an eternity. Finally, she stood up and walked towards the side table. She picked up the picture that sat just beyond the one of her and Richard. It contained a favorite quote from Confucius that she had framed years ago, *The Way is the Goal*. She placed the picture back on the table, next to the one of Dottie with her mom, turned back to Eileen and in a much stronger voice stated, “Grand Canyon.”

“Grand Canyon? Really? How interesting. I’ve heard it’s beautiful and I’ve always wanted to see it myself. Maybe I’ll take a few days off work, and we can go together!”

“No,” Dottie clarified, “not *see* the Grand Canyon – *hike* the Grand Canyon, from the rim to the Colorado River and back up again.”

This time it was Eileen’s turn to be shocked into silence. Certain that this last emotional blow had put her friend over the edge, she reached out and patted Dottie’s hand and said gently,

“Dottie, it’s important to be realistic, honey. The Grand Canyon is one of the most strenuous hikes in the country. Very fit athletes struggle with it. You’re 59 years old, and – let’s be honest, Dot – haven’t exercised regularly since Patrick was born.”

Dottie noticed that Eileen refrained from mentioning all the extra weight that Dottie had gained, particularly since she had gone back to work. She was grateful for her restraint.

Dottie stood up abruptly, smiled at Eileen, and said, “Thank you so much for stopping over Eileen. I do appreciate your friendship, but if you’ll excuse me, I have some training to do.”

Dottie had long dreamed of hiking the Grand Canyon ever since she was a young girl and had watched a documentary on it with her mother, but she had put that dream on the shelf decades ago, not long after she was married. In high school, she had run cross country, and was quite good at it. She continued to run recreationally for years, even going for the occasional run after her first two children were born. By the time her third child came along, it was all she could do to meet everyone’s basic needs, and the running – and exercising altogether – fell by the wayside.

Now, some 25 years and 40 pounds later, she was determined to prove to herself that she was capable of conquering something hard, *extremely* hard.

The idea had her feeling more energized than she had in years. She decided to book the airline tickets that evening, before she could talk herself out of it. She reserved the flight for the first week in October, past the hottest months and after the monsoon season. That gave her almost four months to whip herself into shape.

She set her alarm for 6am the following morning. The summer was beginning to heat up and she wanted to get an early start on her training before the temperatures rose. The next day she nearly leapt out of bed, well before the second alarm went off – she couldn’t remember the

last time she did that – and laced up her sneakers. They were over two years old, but minimally used, so the treads were still in fine shape.

“This is it!” she thought, as she stepped down from her front porch and headed towards the sidewalk. She had decided she would start with a casual 2-mile jog. While it had been years since she ran, she figured a mere two miles would be a fine way to ease back into things. She was about seven minutes into the jog when her knees started to throb and she found she was gasping for air. She had no choice but to walk for a few minutes. She glanced at her watch, assuming she had run almost a mile, and was distressed to find she had only jogged a half mile. The rest of the workout went downhill from there, a four-minute jog followed by an equal walk, then a two-minute shuffle followed by a five-minute walk. Finally, she found herself limping back up her porch steps, reaching the couch inside, and collapsing.

The next morning she waited until the second alarm went off at 6:15 before getting out of bed. She slowly sat up on the edge of her bed and realized every muscle in her body was screaming in pain. It seemed to hurt even when she blinked! She realized she would need another strategy – and some help – to get her to where she needed to be.

She showed up for her first appointment with her new personal trainer, Lizzie, two days later. Lizzie had shiny dark hair, the whitest teeth she had ever seen, long lean muscles, and looked to be a size 4. She flashed those blinding white teeth into a huge grin, clapped her hands together, and cheered, “Ok! Let’s get you warmed up, Dottie!” far too enthusiastically.

She pointed Dottie to the StairMaster, helped her turn it on and said, “Let’s have you warmup with 15 minutes here, and then we’ll begin our workout!”

*Begin* our workout?! The 15 minutes on the StairMaster wasn’t *the* workout?? A feeling of dread engulfed Dottie.

Five minutes later, Dottie was fighting for her life on this horrific contraption while also silently cursing Lizzie and calling her unmentionable names. Those names were not very Christian-like, but then again, Jesus never put anyone on a StairMaster so she figured he would forgive her. Lizzie glanced over, noticed Dottie's bright red face and bulging eyes, and decided to take pity on Dottie - or perhaps she was afraid of the inevitable lawsuit she would face after Dottie had her heart attack. But for whatever reason, she darted over, hit the "off" switch and said, "Ok! I think you're good and warmed up. Let's head over to the dumbbells and work on lunges".

The training went on for weeks, and then months. Dottie was determined to fight through the pain and stick to the plan. Jogging, lunges and squats, hiking up hills, climbing stadiums. The distances got incrementally longer each week. On week three, Lizzie added a 5-pound dumbbell to her backpack before each hike and stadium workout. The weight of the dumbbells increased each week. She was still sore each morning as she slowly shuffled her way to the bathroom, but she was sticking with it, determined to never miss a workout.

Dottie's evenings were often spent reading every article and watching every video she could find about the 16-mile hike she was about to undertake, taking copious notes along the way. Based on everything she learned, she decided she would hike down to the Bright Angel campground using the South Kaibab trail on the canyon's south rim, but return to the rim via the Bright Angel trail which, though longer, was slightly less steep. She jotted down a list of reminders, including: carry at least a gallon of water since there was no water available on the South Kaibab trail, buy hiking shoes a half-size larger than normal as many hikers lose toenails from the constant pounding on the descent, pack plenty of salty snacks and electrolytes to help prevent dehydration, and be prepared to spend much more time on the ascent than the descent as

there was nearly a mile of elevation gain. Before long, her notes filled over three pages in her journal.

After a month had gone by, Dottie agreed to meet Eileen for lunch and update her on her progress. She reached for her black pants and was shocked to find that she could zip them with ease. No safety pin was needed for insurance!

As Dottie entered the restaurant, she spotted Eileen already seated at their favorite table. “Wow! Look at you! You’re looking fantastic, Dottie. You must be so proud!” Eileen seemed genuinely impressed. As they began to catch up, their favorite waitress, Brenda, approached their table.

“Hello ladies! Lovely to see you both, as always. Shall I assume you’re getting your regulars – a Cuban with fries for you,” she nodded towards Eileen, “and shepard’s pie with a side of onion rings for you?” as she looked towards Dottie.

“Actually,” Dottie said, “I think I’ll go with the grilled salmon over brown rice and a side of broccoli, please.”

Eileen raised an impressed eyebrow and turned to Brenda, “You know what? I’m going to eat healthy too! Change my fries to sweet potato fries – but put an extra slice of cheese on the sandwich please.”

She noticed Dottie stifling a chuckle and said, “What? I don’t want my body to go into shock!”

The weeks rolled on and soon it was the first week in August, her halfway point. It was a sticky Friday evening and Dottie was headed to her daughter Rosie’s house for dinner. This was a monthly event that Dottie always looked forward to. As she walked towards the front door, mediterranean salad in hand, she heard a deep voice behind her yell, “Hi, Mom!”



She turned to find Patrick following her up the walk. “Patrick, what are you doing here?”

“What, you don’t want to see me?” Patrick chuckled, “Actually, Rosie invited me.”

“Well it’s wonderful to see you of course, it’s just that it’s usually just Rosie’s family and me. But how nice that you’re joining us this time,” she smiled.

Dottie and Patrick entered the home together. As she stepped into the foyer, she noticed her middle child, Liam, on the couch next to Rosie. Liam and Rosie stood as Dottie and Patrick entered the living room.

“Liam! What a nice surprise!” Dottie exclaimed, before turning to Rosie, “What’s going on Ro? I didn’t realize your brothers would be here. And where’s the rest of your family?”

“Sit down, Mom,” Rosie said somberly, as she nodded towards the loveseat while taking the salad from Dottie, “We just thought we’d have a chat before dinner.” She went on to explain that her husband, Mark, had taken her two sons out for pizza and putt-putt.

Dottie suddenly became very concerned as she cautiously made her way towards the loveseat, “Is everyone ok? Is anyone sick? Rosie, are things ok between you and Mark?”

“Yes Mom, everything is fine with all of us. We just felt we needed to talk to you about, well, this notion you have of hiking the Grand Canyon.”

“*Notion?*” Dottie interrupted, “It’s an adventure. It’s *my* adventure and I fully plan on completing it!” She looked around the room, “Is this an *intervention*? Are you here to talk me out of this hike?”

“Mom, you know how much we love you,” Liam leaned forward on the cushion, elbows on knees, brow knotted in worry, “but you must know how dangerous this hike is. Even the National Park Service strongly cautions against trying to do this hike in one day. We just want

you to be safe, Mom. There are people who have died doing this hike, and well, you're not a young woman any longer, and....."

Patrick and Rosie began to speak at the same time, but Dottie abruptly held up her hand and in a firm, clear voice stated, "Thank you all for your concern. I realize that you all are here out of love and good intentions. But let me assure you, I am taking this hike very seriously. I am preparing physically and mentally and I *will* be ready. I *will* be doing this hike. And I will *not* discuss this any further. So I suggest we all go into that dining room and have a lovely dinner and leave this topic here."

In the following weeks, Dottie continued her preparations with renewed vigor. The dog days of summer were nearing their end. It wasn't so much about proving others wrong, Dottie thought, as it was proving to herself that she was a capable, strong, independent woman, who could do big things. She hadn't felt that way in a long time, and she *needed* this adventure. Still, her children's concerns snuck into her subconscious like a lingering virus she could not shake, threatening her psyche with feelings of self-doubt.

It was Saturday morning and time for Dottie's twice-weekly visit with her mother. She pulled into the familiar parking lot of St. Mary's, her mother's nursing home. It had been almost two years since her mom's stroke, and the deep ache of having to put her in a home had not diminished. Over and over she reprocessed every possible option that had been exhaustively considered for her mom after she lost all mobility, but each time, she could find no other feasible choice but to put her in a home. Her mom's health had been slowly failing ever since Dottie's father died of a heart attack four years earlier, but the stroke left her physically incapacitated. Her mind though, remained sharp. At times, Dottie thought this a cruel punishment that she be so aware of her situation, yet unable to do a thing about it. In all the time she had been in St. Mary's

though, her mom had never complained about her position, choosing instead to make the best of it. She played bingo every Tuesday and Thursday evening and went to the church services every Sunday morning. She joined sing-a-longs and attempted any crafts that her feeble hands would allow. Dottie was constantly amazed at her mother's inner fortitude.

Although it was a very warm and muggy morning, her mom insisted that Dottie wheel her to the outside garden. She had a favorite spot underneath the dogwood tree, next to a bird feeder where she could watch the birds come and go. Dottie had made her mom her favorite banana bread, and as she handed her a slice, she asked, "Mom, can I ask you something?"

"Of course, honey."

"Do you remember when we watched that movie about the Grand Canyon? Back when I was a little girl?"

Her mom put down her bread and stared at the feeder for a moment. "Mmm, oh yes, I remember," she said softly. Then she turned back to Dottie "It looked like the most beautiful place on earth. We always said that we would go one day."

"Mom, how would you feel if I went? And more specifically, how would you feel if I hiked it?"

"Hike the Grand Canyon? Down to the bottom and back?"

"Yes. I know it sounds ridiculous. Everyone thinks I'm crazy, but I need to know what *you* think. We were supposed to go together."

"Dottie," she said, in a voice stronger than she had heard in a while, "you *must* go. You must go for both of us. I don't think it's a crazy idea at all. You are a remarkable woman and I have always believed you could do whatever you set your mind to. Go while you can. Go while

your legs can still carry you,” She paused, and Dottie knew she was thinking of her own useless legs, “All I ask is that you take lots of pictures and then come back here and tell me all about it!”

It was the blessing she needed, and Dottie found her confidence restored.

Finally, it was the night before the big adventure; “one more sleep”, as Dottie used to tell her children on Christmas Eve. She had landed in Arizona a couple of days prior, in order to acclimate to the altitude. As she sat in her hotel room, her mind racing, she absent-mindedly fidgeted with the new charm dangling from her bracelet. It was a sterling silver hiking boot, given to her by her children the week before she left. The three of them had stopped by her home, gift bag in hand, and handed her the gift along with a card that read, *We are so proud of you Mom. We were wrong to try to talk you out of this. We have seen you transform yourself over the last four months, and we know you can do this! Enjoy the journey, and remember, ‘The Way is the Goal’! We love you!*

The morning of the hike, Dottie arose at 4:15am, about 15 minutes before her alarm went off. She had tossed and turned all night. She wanted to be sure she was on one of the earliest shuttles to the South Kaibab trailhead. She would need as much daylight as possible to complete this hike before dark set in, knowing that her night vision was not what it used to be. While she had packed a headlamp, even with it she did not see nearly as well as she did in daylight. When she arrived at the Visitor’s Center an hour later, she had her first view of the massive canyon. It was grander and deeper and wider than the photos made it look, and it struck absolute terror into her heart. She fought back tears and grabbed a nearby railing to steady her shaking legs. What had made her think she could do this??

Just before 6 am, the shuttle had dropped its passengers at the trailhead and Dottie began her descent. The sun was just beginning to rise and the scene was spectacular, but Dottie’s

intense focus would not allow her to look up from the trail directly in front of her. She continued slow and steady, as planned, and before long reached the aptly named *Ooh Aah Point*, nearly one mile down and 800' elevation below the trailhead. This was the first overlook on the trail, so she paused to take a long drink, took a deep inhale to calm her nerves, and looked around at the spectacular scene around her. Her mother's words rang in her ears, "*It looked like the most beautiful place on earth.*"

*Indeed it is, Mom*, Dottie whispered to herself, *indeed it is.*

She took several pictures and continued down the path, one steep switchback following the other, one manmade step after the next, before stopping briefly for more water and pictures at the next overlook, *Cedar Ridge*. The majesty of this vast canyon was indeed breathtaking, and changed in color and shape with every turn of the trail.

The third juncture was *Skeleton Point*. It was here, three miles down from the rim and a 2,000' elevation decline, that the National Park Service warned all day hikers to turn around, considering a longer trek to be too extreme to accomplish in a day. Dottie ate the first of her peanut butter and jelly sandwiches and did a self-check and a brief stretch; thus far, despite some dull aches in her knees and feet, she was feeling pretty strong. *Slow and steady*, she reminded herself, *you're ready for this.*

The final overlook before reaching the ominous black bridge that crossed the Colorado River was *The Tipoff*, 1.5 miles and many more brutal switchbacks down from *Skeleton Point*. By the time she reached this overlook, her knees were screaming and her toes were aching. All of her training on the StairMaster and stadiums had not prepared her for the relentless downhill pounding that came as part of the steep descent. She felt panic begin to set in. If she was finding the downhill so difficult, what would the climb out be like? She took a long break, drank her

water, and again remembered her mom's words, "*Go while you can. Go while your legs can still carry you.*" She ate a protein bar and a banana, stood up, and with renewed purpose, continued. Just 2.7 miles more to Bright Angel campground on the Colorado River at the bottom of the canyon.

She reached the campground just after 9:30, meeting her goal time. She knew though, that the hardest part lay ahead. It would be over a 9-mile climb until she reached the rim at the Bright Angel trailhead.

As expected, her pace was much slower on the hike up than it was down. It took her almost 4 hours to reach *Havasupai Gardens*, the halfway point between the river and the rim. After a long rest, which included consuming two more sandwiches, pretzels and a Gatorade, she began the final – and hardest – part of the climb. The last 4.5 miles ascend over 3,000' in elevation. They were incredibly grueling. She found herself stopping to rest every half mile and began to fear she wouldn't reach the rim before dark. Although it was October, the afternoon had reached over 80 degrees of unrelenting sun. Eventually, she only had two miles to go, but the hiking intervals between each rest had become shorter and the duration of the rests longer. She looked up to find the sun in the sky, worrying that it would set before she was able to reach the rim and that she wouldn't be able to see. Her legs felt like rubber and early waves of nausea were beginning to set in.

She heard a group of feet shuffling behind her, so she moved to the side of the trail to let them pass. It was a group of nine Native American men and women, wearing matching bright teal t-shirts and massive backpacks that appeared much larger and heavier than Dottie's. The group members varied in all different shapes, sizes and ages, the youngest appearing to be in

their 30's, and the eldest in their 70's. One of the older women stopped and smiled at her, "Are you ok?" she asked Dottie.

"To be honest, I'm not sure."

"There is no rush with this journey," she replied, "we have been out here for four days, camping in the backcountry along the way. We started on the north rim. It is our annual family tradition, and we just take our time so we can appreciate this beauty that God has given us." She paused and pointed to a small tin-roofed structure, a bit further up the trail, "Do you see that resthouse up there?" Dottie nodded. "That is the *1.5 Mile Resthouse*. It has benches and running water. Once you reach there, you can take a break in the shade, and then you only have 1.5 miles to the rim. Follow us. We are slow, but we will make it."

"I'm just worried about making it there before dark. I don't see well in the dark."

The woman looked up to the sky and back to Dottie, "We will make it," she assured her.

And so it was, at 6:14pm, a little more than 12 hours after Dottie started, she took the last step up the trail behind her newfound friends and reached the rim!

She thanked them and hugged them goodbye and then hobbled her way over to the patio of the Bright Angel Lodge. She grabbed a table and watched the sunset over this awe-inspiring canyon that just that morning, had almost paralyzed her with fear. The sunset amplified the vivid layers of rock strata – reds, yellows and greens – created by millions of years of erosion and minerals deposited along the way. Dottie had never felt so small, and at the same time, so full. Tears again welled up in her eyes, but this time they were tears of pride and joy.

Just then, the waiter interrupted her thoughts to take her order. "I would like to order your Elk Bolognese," Dottie requested, "but could you add one thing, please?"

"Sure, what's that?"

She looked up from her menu, smiled broadly and said, “Red pepper flakes.”