

Grand Canyon

They had driven across fourteen states only to end up doing the same things they did back home. Kimmie watched a housefly buzz up and down, up and down, between the kitchen window and screen. Beyond the baffled fly, Derek's old Ford Econoline was stranded up on cinder blocks, surrounded by metal junk in Nick and Niecy's yard in Flagstaff. The end of another day, and the four of them sat drinking beer in Nick and Niecy's sticky little kitchen, half-watching the portable TV on the counter. Nick and Niecy said there was nothing else to do in Flag.

Flag. Kimmie had already learned to say it in the flat, bored way of the locals. But the trip had started so fine, Derek whistling old Johnny Cash tunes as they drove two-lane back roads down the coast from New Hampshire and across the South. Derek talked as he drove about his dreams of traveling, of building a cabin someday and setting up his own woodworking shop. He talked fast and breathlessly, like a little kid with a big secret. Kimmie knew with quiet pride that he never told these things to anyone else. I'm his dream-keeper, she thought, listening to his talk and watching other people's houses fly by.

As they went further west, Kimmie delighted in the small things that meant they were far from home. She liked the roadside restaurants with grits on the menu and waitresses who called her sweetheart, and the way Derek politely took off his cap when they walked inside. She liked to watch him study the menu, his blond hair falling across his eyes. Sometimes she couldn't help herself from reaching over to touch his new beard, smooth and bright as corn silk.

The soft, green South gave way to Texas, with dry plains the colour of deer. Then the red hills of New Mexico. Derek said the Grand Canyon would be like those hills, the earth streaked with colour and huge like no place Kimmie had ever been.

Kimmie had been thinking about the Grand Canyon since the morning Derek laid a map on their kitchen table and asked what she wanted to see. She had no idea what was on that map. She was nineteen and had never been anywhere. The only place she had heard of was the Grand Canyon, so she said that was the one thing she wanted to see. Derek marked it with a star, just above Flagstaff, Arizona, where his brother Nick lived. As they drove west,

the Grand Canyon began to loom in Kimmie's mind. Though she had named it so casually in the kitchen back home, it became her heart's destination as they made their way across the country.

Now they were only ninety miles south of the Grand Canyon and it seemed as remote as Mars. The van had stalled for good just outside of Flag. Derek phoned Nick and Kimmie heard him insisting that they could make it into town on their own. "Just tell me where your house is." He must have said that six or seven times.

They arrived at Nick and Niecy's jammed in the cab of a tow truck, the old Econoline dragging behind. Nick stood with his fists on his hips, his head thrown back, laughing. Niecy stood behind him, giggling into her hand. Derek wrenched the truck door open and stepped down. He jerked his head at the tow-truck driver and said to Kimmie, "Pay him, we're here." Kimmie counted out the last of their money into the driver's dirty hand. He pocketed the money, then went around to unhook the van. Kimmie sat for a minute, watching Derek through the truck's dusty windshield, thinking about how he had just said "pay him" without a "would you mind?" or a "please." He stood with his head down, kicking at the yard, like he had lost something in the scanty dry weeds.

Suddenly Kimmie understood – this trip wasn't about seeing the USA or even her Grand Canyon. It was Nick's trip. It was the trip Nick had taken two years ago on a motorcycle and got busted in El Paso and tattooed by a holy man and worked an oil rig off Long Beach and finally found a woman named Niecy who welded metal junk together in Flagstaff, Arizona, and called it art. Derek had wanted the same, Kimmie thought – to roll into Flag with his own stories and maybe a wild girl he had picked up in Texas. Instead he was saddled with Kimmie and a broken-down van, and nothing but a string of quiet country restaurants behind him. She opened her pocketbook and started to rummage for her hairbrush, then changed her mind. Instead, she just slid off the grimy truck seat and walked over to introduce herself to Nick and Niecy.

The faithful Econoline had a lot wrong with it. Nick laughed as he and Derek pulled out part after part, all furred with black grease.

"Hey, little bro, you really got taken. How much did you pay for this heap? Why didn't you check the plugs? the carburetor?"

Kimmie wanted to punch him. She watched Derek get more and more sullen as Nick piled van parts around him. When Nick grinned and flipped Derek's cap backwards, he looked like he would cry with rage.

Kimmie didn't see why it was so important to prove anything to Nick. Who was Nick, anyway? He had Derek's full lips and strong cleft chin, but his eyes were puffy and his stomach was already going soft. He'd be fat by the time he was thirty. He built houses for a Mexican guy and resented working for someone who could hardly speak English. He called Niecy "hey Woman" and did a caveman act – "hey Woman gimme a beer" – that allowed him to order her around without seeming to do so. Niecy was smitten with Nick, just like Derek. She was squint-eyed and skinny, with frizzy brown hair that reminded Kimmie of the dry Texas plains. She watched Nick as though he was on loan to her and liable to be repossessed any day.

The van needed lots of money, so Kimmie and Derek were nailed down in Flag for awhile. Niecy's house was full of junk. The rooms were crammed with metal colanders, old brake pads, rusty bedsprings, things she would weld into weird shapes. She also went to flea markets and brought home sway-backed furniture and broken radios and lamps. Niecy seemed overwhelmed at the thought of trying to clear out a spot for them to sleep, so Kimmie and Derek slept in the van.

Kimmie had liked sleeping in the van when they were on the road. At night they lay on the floor and talked about where they'd been, where they would go next. They made love slowly and quietly in the dark. Now the light from Nick and Niecy's kitchen glared into the van and their little TV spluttered all night. Derek mostly talked about money now, how much they needed, how little they had. He turned to her one night, grabbed her and said "hey Woman me want you." Kimmie pushed him away, surprised at how repulsed she felt. Derek saw and was hurt. Since then he had made a point of turning away from her when they lay down on the mattress.

Nick promised to get Derek hired onto the Martinez building crew to cut two-by-fours and vinyl siding. When Kimmie mentioned that she had used a power saw in her high school shop class, Nick threw up his hands like a wall.

"No way, you wouldn't want that." He said it as though things went on at the job, things deeper and darker than cutting wood and vinyl. Derek looked at the floor. Guy's work. She wished they would just come out and say it.

They came home after Derek's first day on the job and sat getting drunk and making fun of Mr. Martinez.

"Es like thees, how you do thees," Derek said, miming the cutting of boards. Nick and Niecy laughed, they were all laughing, and for a moment it was cheerful. Then Nick chimed in and it started getting mean, about how Mexicans were taking all the jobs in Arizona. Nick and Derek kept it up, imitating little Mr. Martinez driving his big truck, eating his tortillas and beans. Niecy brayed and wiped her wet eyes. Kimmie squirmed. She finally slipped off her stool and went out to the van. Derek didn't follow. She heard his laugh through the open window as she undressed. It sounded forced and ugly. Things were coming alive in Derek, things that Nick brought out in him. Things that must have been there the year they lived together after high school and for the long, sweet drive to Flag.

When Derek crawled into the van much later, Kimmie pretended sleep. Then she changed her mind and opened her eyes. She told Derek, matter-of-factly, with no crying, that she did not like to see him making fun of Mr. Martinez, his accent, what he ate and how he drove. She waited. If Mr. Martinez gave Derek reasons for being hateful, she was willing to listen. But Derek just sighed and rolled over onto his stomach. Kimmie said she couldn't wait to see the Grand Canyon and get the hell out of Flag. She didn't care if Nick or Niecy heard her. Derek breathed heavily as though he were sleeping.

Kimmie finally found a job at an agency that provided household help to elderly residents of Flagstaff. It was run out of the basement of a stucco Baptist church but no one asked her anything about religion. She filled out a one-page application and was happy to be able to

check off that she had never been arrested. There didn't seem to be any other qualifications. There was no regular work. Lidia, the program director, told her to show up every morning and if there was an elderly person in need, she would drive her to the job.

Kimmie showed up the first day and sat in a room with three other women. They seemed to know each other and spoke in Spanish, joking and laughing. One by one, they were called to jobs. Kimmie was left sitting alone. She realized she was relieved that no elderly person needed her help. She had never known any old people and did not know how to talk to them. Her neighbourhood growing up was full of families, people her parents' age and their kids. Her grandparents were dead except for one grandfather, but her father didn't get along with him and they didn't visit.

Kimmie sat and read old copies of a magazine called *Arizona North*. It was full of photos of turquoise jewelry, red cliffs, and snow-capped mountains. She wondered if she would ever see any of it. At noon, Lidia told her she could go home, there was no work for the day. Kimmie was reluctant to leave the quiet room and its colorful magazines. She realised it was the first time she had been alone since she and Derek left home.

The next morning Lidia asked Kimmie if she had ever washed walls. Kimmie lied and said yes. How hard could it be? So Lidia drove her to a neighborhood of small houses with square patches of grass behind chainlink fences.

The woman who answered the door was tall. She looked down into Kimmie's face, her shoulders hunched forward. She had dark, piercing eyes. She shook Kimmie's hand, a manly shake that surprised Kimmie with its vigour. Her name was Delia. She was a white woman, but her skin was brown and ridged like the hills beyond the Texas plains. She was thin to the point of bony. She looked very old.

Kimmie stepped into Delia's kitchen. She breathed in a smell – dry and sweetly sharp – at the same moment she saw a blue box of salt on the table. It all became one to her – the smell, the blue box, the thin, dry woman – the smell of salt and old age.

The house was small, with four square rooms and glass doors in the kitchen that led to a pink brick patio. The living room, Delia called it the parlour, was heaped in the middle with furniture and books and framed photos lined up across the couch. For a moment, Kimmie wondered if this was how old people lived. Then she remembered – the walls. Delia said she was not up to washing the walls this year but did not explain why. Kimmie thought it was impolite to ask.

Delia's walls were pale yellow, like the inside of a lemon. Kimmie realised she had no idea how to begin. But Delia saved her. She offered to fill a bucket, then returned from the kitchen with hot soapy water, a sponge and a short ladder. Then she left and Kimmie heard the whoosh of the sliding doors.

Kimmie worked like a demon. She did not want Delia to think she was taking advantage of being paid by the hour. The only other job she'd had was picking strawberries in the summer, paid by the quart. It was strange to work in someone's house. Delia kept out of the living room, but Kimmie was always aware of her going between the kitchen and patio, snapping cabinet doors open and shut.

Delia checked in once and told Kimmie to slow down and not tucker herself out, better to do a job right than quick. Kimmie took a deep breath and concentrated on scrubbing every inch of the wall. Delia was right. There was no reason to rush. There was Derek and the tiny kitchen at the end of the day and it was sad but true that she was not eager to see either one of them.

Later Delia poked her head in and said it was lunchtime. Kimmie realised that she hadn't thought to pack any food, but Delia had lunch waiting for her on the table. There was a ham and cheese sandwich on square white bread, a glass of milk and graham crackers. Delia sat across from her and peeled a tangerine. She laid half of it by Kimmie's plate.

They ate without speaking. Kimmie looked around the kitchen and inhaled the smell of salt and age. Delia's kitchen was the land of the old. There was a big, clunky dial phone on the counter, plastic canisters labeled Sugar, Flour and Tea, and the long rectangle of white sandwich bread. There was also a tiny bird sitting quietly in a cage that she had not noticed earlier. Delia saw her looking and said it was a finch. There had been two. One had died recently.

"It looks lonesome," Kimmie said.

Delia looked at the finch and cocked her head. "No," she said. "He's always looked like that." She took a banana from a bowl and peeled it down as she ate it. She had a long upper lip covered with gray down and took the banana in her mouth neatly and carefully.

"How's it going?" she asked, after she finished the banana and folded the peel.

Kimmie shrugged, thinking of the van up on its blocks, the tedious nights in Nick and Niecy's kitchen, the Grand Canyon far away. "Okay, I guess."

"Maybe the bucket needs freshening up," Delia replied. "How's the sandwich?"

"Fine, thanks." The bread was too soft and the cheese was gummy, the packaged kind. But Kimmie remembered this was a job, and it was kind of Delia to supply lunch.

"Have as much ham as you want. I'm not a big meat eater. Since I moved here, I mostly eat fruit. I think it's the dry air."

Kimmie could think of nothing to say to that and they finished their lunch sitting as quietly as the finch.

She finished washing the living room walls and moved the furniture back into place, easing the feet of the couch and chairs back into the circles they had long ago pressed into the rug. She wasn't sure what to do with the photographs. She looked at them, trying to piece Delia's life together. There were several black-and-white photos of a family in seaside settings. A man and woman, a girl and boy. They stood on a beach holding clam rakes, on a dock next to a small sailboat, and posed smiling with a huge fish. The man had muscular shoulders and curly hair. Something about him suggested a redhead, even in the black-and-white photos. The woman was tall, slim but robust, with a cap of thick, dark hair and Delia's piercing eyes. It was hard for Kimmie to imagine this woman, with her smooth bare legs and the man's arm around her trim waist, as Delia. It seemed that Delia had always pattered around in her dry, sharp-smelling house while the woman in the photograph stood in the sun, the man's hand resting on the curve of her hip.

There was a large studio photograph of a boy Derek's age in a military uniform, overwhelmed by the visored cap on his head. He looked scared and big-eared as boys in uniform always do. There was also a photo of a young woman leaning against a whitewashed building with an old-fashioned bicycle. But that was all, as though these two had passed into their own lives and never returned to Delia. There were no other photos of the man.

Delia stepped into the room holding out Kimmie's pay for the day, all crisp bills. Kimmie was flustered to be caught studying the photos. It seemed shameful to stand in Delia's home comparing her past with her bony present. Kimmie stuffed the bills in her pocket and mumbled a thanks.

She decided to walk home instead of calling Lidia for a ride back to the church. She walked through Delia's neighbourhood then across a highway to a Mexican neighbourhood, with gardens and statues of sad-eyed saints in the tiny yards. She pulled out the bills and counted them. Not much, but she was surprised at how good it felt to have her own cash in her hands. Then she pushed the money deep into her pocket, picturing a Mexican guy coming out of one of the small houses and grabbing it from her. Nick had put that thought in her head. She thought of Derek spending entire days with him. They had to get the van fixed soon. Then she and Derek could drive to the Grand Canyon. When they were back on the road, Derek would lose the meanness that had taken hold of him. He would talk about his dreams and be shy and trusting once again.

She didn't mention the money that night, not while Nick and Niecy were there. Instead, she told them about her day, about not knowing how to wash walls, about the lunch laid out in the old-fashioned kitchen. She described Delia, the way she ate her banana so seriously, like a monkey. Instantly, Nick and Derek were off. They chattered their teeth and scratched their armpits. Kimmie told them to stop, but they howled and pulled faces. Niecy held her skinny sides and laughed, bent over double like a person in pain.

Kimmie thought of Delia, her peaceful kitchen, the sandwich waiting on the plate at lunchtime. She pictured Delia sitting in her living room now, with its clean yellow walls and the surviving finch alone in its cage. Derek put his face up to hers, tilted his head and grimaced. She reached out to slap him and caught herself just in time. But Nick had seen.

"Leave her alone," he snapped. He looked at her with something like approval, and Kimmie swallowed down a flash of pride. She would not join his fan club. Derek sat down and made a show of taking a big gulp of beer. Niecy blew her nose, wiped her eyes, and brayed a few more times. Nick silenced her by stepping firmly on her foot.

When Kimmie and Derek were together in the van, she pulled out Delia's money and handed it to him.

"For the van. For getting out of here."

"Why can't you just relax and let people have a good time?"

"When are we going to the Canyon?"

"Are you still on that? You're setting yourself up for a big disappointment. Nick says last time he was there Navajo kids were throwing pop cans and cigarette butts off the edge."

“Are you saying we’re not going?”

“I’m just saying that this trip is not what I thought it was going to be either.” He took the crisp bills, reached under the driver’s seat, and took out the leather pouch that held their money. He counted it. “We’re going to be here awhile. You might as well enjoy it. What have you got against Nick and Niecy, anyway?”

It was not Nick and Niecy. Nick lorded it over them and Niecy was pathetic, but they’d been generous about the short visit turning into a long stay. It was Derek. This new Derek who was bitter and sneered at people he both ridiculed and resented. This Derek who seemed content to sit drinking beer night after night and wake up groggy and sour-breathed the next morning. She realised she wanted more than anything to get Derek out of Flag before he became this new person for good.

The next day Kimmie washed Delia’s bathroom walls, which had wallpaper with drawings of bare-breasted mermaids. It was embarrassing. She was glad to move on to a small room that Delia called the den, which had odds and ends of wooden furniture and a rug that Delia said was a genuine Navajo rug. Delia made lunch and Kimmie ate her sandwich while Delia sliced a melon. The finch whistled two soft notes and Delia gave it some melon seeds. She showed Kimmie how to sprinkle her melon with salt, pouring a little out of the blue box into Kimmie’s hand. The melon was mildly sweet and the salt gave it a tang. It was the first new thing she had experienced since arriving in Flag. When Kimmie left at the end of the day, Delia gave her cash and a slice of melon. She ate it slowly as she walked to the highway.

Nick and Niecy fought that night. Kimmie had seen it brewing in the way Nick moved through the house as though it was suddenly too small for him, kicking aside the clutter and sweeping a pile of papers onto the floor. Niecy watched him, her rodent mouth working nervously. The actual fight started over something small, over the way Niecy peeled the label off her beer bottles and left the shreds on the table. Then they yelled and leaned toward each other like they were ready to spit. They alternately ignored Derek and Kimmie or played to them like an audience. Kimmie did not know how to leave. It seemed that whatever civility was left between Nick and Niecy would vanish if Derek and Kimmie left the room.

Nick finally ran out to the yard and pushed one of Niecy’s sculptures to the ground. It broke and pieces of it bowled across the dirt. Then he drove away. Niecy sat slumped on the front step and sobbed for him to come back. She cried for a long time, while Derek stood behind her, patting her shoulder once in awhile. Kimmie walked around the yard picking up pieces of the ruined sculpture. She was sorry for Niecy, but repelled by all the crying. She wished Niecy would get up and start welding the sculpture back together or maybe change the locks. When Derek gestured over Niecy’s head that Kimmie come to comfort her, Kimmie recoiled and instead offered to go pick up more beer. Niecy kept wailing Nick’s name, so Kimmie went into the van and took out the leather money pouch. She was surprised to find so little money in it. Derek was right – they would be in Flag for a long time.

Kimmie was glad to have Delia’s house to go to the next day. She arrived early, while Delia was still sitting in the kitchen finishing breakfast. She offered Kimmie a cup of coffee. It was instant coffee and tasted like dirt. Kimmie wondered why someone with time on her hands

would drink instant coffee. Delia told her it was the last day for wall washing. She had decided to have the kitchen walls painted later in the year so there was no need to wash them now. Kimmie sipped her muddy coffee and wondered if Delia would miss having her to talk with every day. There was still a lot of bread left in the long sandwich loaf on the counter.

“What’s next for you?” Delia asked.

“I’ve got to get to the Grand Canyon.” It burst out of Kimmie before she had time to think.

Delia smiled. “Well, it’s right up the road, honey.”

Then Kimmie told it all. Or most of it. She left out the parts about Derek’s brand new prejudice against Mexicans and how he turned his back on her at night in the van. She didn’t want Delia to despise him, and she couldn’t imagine Delia would understand about sex. But she tried to explain how he had joined Nick and Niecy, how he had somehow left her behind. Delia sat and nodded and the finch whistled his quiet notes. Kimmie sniffed and was embarrassed to find she was crying. She realised she’d been wanting to cry since she’d handed the last of their money to the tow-truck driver. It was too confusing. How could Delia understand if Kimmie didn’t even understand? In the end, Delia just handed her a kleenex and poured her another cup of muddy coffee. Kimmie wiped her eyes, blew her nose, and said it seemed like she was never going to get to the Grand Canyon.

“There’s a little tourist bus that will take you up to the Canyon anytime. It’s fifty dollars, up and back the same day. Hop on right across from that Baptist church that sent you here.”

Kimmie sighed. It wasn’t that simple. No, Delia couldn’t see that it was so much more than the Grand Canyon. But she thanked her for the information, wondering how she and Derek could ever hope to scrounge up a hundred dollars. Derek would think it was a waste of money anyway. He’d want to wait and get the van fixed first.

Kimmie finished her coffee and Delia led her down the hall to the bedroom. She dreaded walking into Delia’s bedroom. It seemed unbearably personal. She imagined it sour-smelling, with a narrow, tightly-made bed.

But Delia’s room was airy and the walls were pale pink, like the inside of a seashell. A bright machine-stitched quilt covered a double bed. Kimmie thought of the man and woman in the beach photos and felt her face flush. Delia had removed pictures from the walls and there were bright squares of paint where they’d hung. There was still one print on the wall of a pigtailed girl holding a watering can. Delia removed it carefully. Behind it was a small wall safe. She gave Kimmie a conspiratorial wink.

“Look. Just like in the movies. It came with the house.” She chuckled, clicked it open, bent to peer inside, then closed it. “Try not to get water in it, honey.”

Kimmie sponged the walls, taking her time. The bedroom faced the backyard and she could see Delia through the window. She was on the patio pattering around with pots of geraniums and a long wooden box of cactus. Kimmie looked around the room. There was an electric clock on the bed. Delia had wrapped the cord around it. Delia was like that. Everything was done neatly, no loose ends.

She worked around the safe and made sure no water dripped into it. Then she just had to do it, like checking for change in a payphone, she pulled the knob. It opened. She stood with her hand on the knob, surprised into stillness. She held her breath and looked inside. In the small cube of stainless steel sat a man's watch, a few yellowed envelopes and a thin stack of bills, probably the source of her pay each afternoon. She let out her breath and looked out the window. Delia was bent over the box of cactus, poking the dirt with a stick. Kimmie took another breath and before she let herself think, took the bills, counted out fifty dollars, put the rest back in the safe, closed it and spun the dial to make sure it was locked. She heard the whoosh of the sliding glass doors and her stomach lurched. Water hissed from the kitchen faucet. The doors whooshed again. She replaced the picture of the girl with the watering can. She fingered the bills in her pocket. She took the picture down again. But it was too late. The safe was locked now. Outside, Delia gently poured water on her geraniums.

Kimmie thought of the Grand Canyon. The one place she had asked to see. She thought of Niecy, sitting like a dog on the steps, waiting for Nick to come back and be nice again. She pushed a bedside table into place and unwound the cord of the electric clock. She plugged it in and put it on the table. She checked her watch and set the clock to the correct time. She took two deep breaths and walked out to the kitchen. The finch watched her with grave round eyes. She could hear Delia in the backyard, talking to a neighbor.

"He says it's the dry air out here...", she was saying.

Kimmie slipped out the door, walked quickly down the driveway, then broke into a run on the street. She looked behind once, but Delia's house sat quiet and empty-looking as ever. She ran faster. When she reached the highway, her breath was ragged and her throat ached. She had been on the track team in high school and couldn't believe she was already so out of shape. Maybe it was the altitude in Flag. Or maybe it was the dry air.

She walked along the highway then jogged slowly down the side streets to the Baptist church. A small bus sat across the street with High Country Tours written across the side. Kimmie ran up to the open door. A large white man in a cowboy hat sat at the wheel reading a newspaper.

"Slow down there, young lady, I don't leave for another quarter hour."

Kimmie asked him if he was going to the Grand Canyon and he said yes, Painted Desert trips were on Tuesdays only. She held out her fifty dollars and he took it without moving his eyes from the newspaper. She walked to the back of the bus and watched out the window, waiting for Lidia to fly out of the Baptist church to stop her. She remembered checking off the box on the application saying she had never been arrested. But this was fate. The money stacked neatly in the open safe – some of it would have been hers by the end of the day anyway – the tour bus waiting for her at the curb. Would Delia wonder why Kimmie had run off without her pay? Would she think to count the money in the safe? Would she call the police?

Kimmie wished the driver would start the bus. She felt queasy. She hadn't had lunch and the instant coffee was eating away at her empty stomach. She told herself it would all work out. She would go back to Delia and explain how it happened. She would apologise and offer to work off the money she had taken. Delia would forgive her. She would be happy to have Kimmie around for another few days. She might even admire Kimmie's pluck.

A group of people drifted onto the bus and the driver started the engine. They were on their way to the Grand Canyon.

Later, on the long ride back, Kimmie drifted in and out of a half-sleep. The Canyon hung in her mind like a huge backdrop in a movie. It looked like the photos in *Arizona North* magazine. She had stood at the railing, too hungry to walk very far and afraid the bus would leave without her. She remembered tourists leaning over the railing with their cameras, calling to each other in German and Japanese, oblivious to the buzz of emptiness that rose from the Canyon. It was a real place and Kimmie had been there. Finally.

The Canyon faded and Kimmie watched her hand reaching into the little wall safe. She tried to pull it back but it kept reaching. Then the Canyon rose again, huge and silent. Then her hand. She was two people now. The Kimmie who had sat sniffing in Delia's kitchen. And the Kimmie who had taken Delia's money and made her way to the Grand Canyon.

It was dark when she stepped down from the bus. Instead of going to Nick and Niecy's, she found herself walking down the highway to Delia's house. Later, she would crow about her journey to Derek and show him she could take matters into her own hands. She knew how to make dreams come true.

But first, she would sit in Delia's kitchen and tell the truth. Tell Delia that the Canyon had been a letdown, the sight of it tainted by the stolen money. Delia would say that was punishment enough. They would sit together in the quiet kitchen. Kimmie remembered the first time she had stepped into Delia's house, the dry tangy smell and the blue box of salt. She hurried along in the dark. She hoped Delia had not called the police.

Lights were on in Delia's house and there was a car in the driveway. Kimmie walked past it and knocked on the kitchen door. She heard whistling inside, the lonesome finch.

The door opened and a man stood there, a whistle still on his pursed lips. It hissed like air out of a flat tire when he saw her. He was tall, his gray hair thinning on top but still curly, and yes, she could see he had been a redhead once. He stood for a moment with his hand on the doorknob, then shouted over his shoulder.

"Dee! It's that kid! She's here."

Kimmie swallowed. The man looked behind him without moving away from the door, and Kimmie knew Delia was standing in the arched entry between the kitchen and the parlour. She remembered scrubbing that wall, how surprisingly grimy it was, as though many hands had touched it while groping for the light switch.

"Tell her to go. And never come back."

The man smiled gently at Kimmie and shrugged with his palms held outward, as if to say he was sorry there was nothing more to be done. Then he slowly shut the door.

Kimmie walked back down the driveway, her arms wrapped across her belly, hands gripping her elbows. The night air was cold and it was quiet, only the sound of cars on the highway. She walked slowly through the Mexican neighbourhood. A dark-haired woman stepped out of one of the tiny houses and poured a pail of water on a patch of flowers by the curb. She looked at Kimmie and made a noise – tsk! tsk! – with her tongue.

“A girl shouldn’t walk alone at night,” she said. She shook her finger at Kimmie, scolding.

“You don’t know me!” Kimmie whispered fiercely. The woman stepped back in surprise.

Kimmie felt the woman’s eyes on her as she walked down the street, but when she looked back, the street was empty. She hurried along toward Nick and Niecy’s house, her ears buzzing with the enormous silence of the Grand Canyon. She began to make up the story she would tell about it, how magnificent it was, beyond all her imaginings.

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