

ESSAY

14-15 “The Grand Canyon” by Hannah Irvine

It happened when I was at that strange age between eight and nine, but I wasn’t in the middle either – I was just a few weeks away from being nine.

“Hannah, look out the window! You can see the shadows of clouds on the hills!” “You’re wasting your time, Sharon, she doesn’t care. There’s no point in trying to get her to even pretend to care,” Dad said irritably to Mama, who had been trying to get me to look out the window for the past two hours. We were taking our routine trip out of the desert, where we went every other summer or so.

Yet there was something that made this particular vacation particularly special: we were going to see the Grand Canyon. I had always wanted to see it, but I had no clue exactly what it was. I remember sitting in the car with my parents, zoning out as they talked about politics or “the good old days,” subjects that never meant anything to me. I stared out the car window at the vast desert that stretched on for what seemed to be millions of miles. I thought about cowboys and Indians fighting. I thought about Clint Eastwood in *The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly*. I wished I’d paid more attention when I saw that movie. Coincidentally, my dad turned on the soundtrack. I doodled idly in my notebooks with my rapidly melting crayons. The heat of the desert seeped through the car windows and stung my pale skin. My dad said something about a petrified forest, and my ears perked up. Finally, something interesting. He said we’d be there before the Grand Canyon. *Boring*. Back to zoning out again and pretending to listen. I couldn’t wait to get there, but it would be a while.

I took my own vacation to La-La Land until my parents yelled at me to pay attention to something beautiful: The Painted Desert. It looked like giant piles of sand with stripes of purple, blue, pink, tan, gray, and brown literally painted on them. Stupid me, why didn’t I pay more attention when my parents told me to?

We drove through the Painted Desert; it was beautiful, but to an eight-year-old not exciting enough. I tuned out until I saw the Petrified Forest and got out of the car. The tour guide would not stop talking, though. As he babbled about some Indian runes on nearby rocks, I noticed a lizard on an old log that stretched between some cliffs and ignored my dad’s urgent hissing and scoldings under his breath, while I ventured further down the log. I looked down the dizzying drop. Ugh. I was afraid of heights, yes, but this was too good to miss: an ancient log, a magnificent view down, *and* a really cool lizard. Now for some *real* fun, I thought. I could shove that lizard in Mama’s face! HA! So what if I risked my life? I *only had one life*, so why should it be wasted on listening to a *stupid* tour guide prattle on and point to old bluish paintings on boulders? My dad turned an array of funny colors and appeared to be having an intricate combination between a nervous breakdown and a heart attack, and then he yanked me off the log, hissing his displeasure into my ears. I hated all the conflict between me and my parents. When would they learn I would be okay? Why couldn’t we do things my way for once? I pouted and felt stupid.

Finally, after what seemed to be hours of more boredom, whining, and anticipation, it was time for *The Grand Canyon*! I raced towards the edge of the immensely high cliffs and stood millimeters from falling. I stared straight down and ignored my terror of great heights. This was too cool to be scared of (even if my head was spinning). I liked how the little plateaus and other scenery could be seen and then

seemed to disappear because they were too far away to see from there. I walked closer to the edge to get a better look down. I leaned forward and peered down into the canyon. Wow! What a view! I could see little bushes on a greenish brown land. But were those bushes? The place I stood was awfully high ... My dad turned a very strange shade of plum.

“GET AWAY FROM THAT! YOU’RE GOING TO FALL AND BREAK YOUR BONES!!” Dad bellowed like an angry bull elephant, offending other tourists as he flailed around like a madman while balancing his camera on his shoulder. Did everyone really *need* to hear that? Apparently Dad thought so, and he shouted until his voice cracked like a fourteen-year-old boy’s. He continued his rampage while I sat there dazed. I studied him. What a multi-tasker! He could run around, turn all the colors in the rainbow, balance a camera, *and* shriek like an insane asylum escapee! To top it all, he could sure embarrass his wife and daughter.

“Aw, it’s not scary!” I argued feebly.

“YES IT IS! IT’S TERRIFYING! GET AWAY RIGHT NOW! *RIGHT NOW!*” I found a safer place and perched myself on a miniature rock wall at the very edge of a cliff. I looked straight at a strange tree that resembled some sort of pine. I reached to touch its deep green spiny branches. I began to lose my balance. I *did* have only one lie, and I was not too keen on losing it to the sickening heights of this place. Terrified, I quickly jerked my arm back and clutched the edges of the stout little rock wall. I looked down at more of those funny bushes and at other ledges farther down. Just how big *was* this place? I could see a very thin line that was the Colorado River. I realized those strange greenish blotches weren’t bushes because if something as big as a river was a thin line, bushes would be too small to see from this altitude.

I looked out at the infinitely huge family of flat-topped hills and the traces of a distant something. Who knows what was beyond what I could see? I could only see so far, and then it all turned to a purple misty fog, blending in with the skies. I wished I could see further out. I wondered just how big this canyon was. If I couldn’t even see all of it, it must be pretty huge, I thought. My ears picked up many foreign languages, each interesting and fascinating. I listened to some people marvel at the canyon’s rugged elegance in German. The language was beautiful and mysterious to me, just like the canyon. It was graceful, yet almost course, just like the canyon. The warm Arizona sun reddened my tender skin. At that moment I swore to myself I’d live in the desert someday, no matter how badly I got sunburned.

I stared at the canyon; I stared at those little plateaus. They looked like monstrous tables for gargantuan invisible giants to eat off. I wondered what they ate. The phrase “For purple mountains’ majesty...” kept ringing through my head. Those big tables were purple mountains. Actually, brownish red. But the ones further away looked purple. Purple mountains. Except these mountains had flat tops. What made those purple mountains? What made the canyon? At the time I didn’t know that a process called erosion caused canyons to form, and those little plateaus were most likely caused by erosion and vertical faults that pushed up flat blocks of rock. If only I’d known what made that canyon so grant. I was too young then to understand anything, but now I understand everything. I look back at that canyon in my memory, and I look back at how whiney and ignorant I was. I now know that humans are very small, and we may be smart, but in the end, we’re just tiny grains of sand. The mere memory of the canyon’s

size has made me feel humbler. Looking back on it makes me feel small. I like to feel small. Feeling small is good sometimes because I can escape from life's problems. Problems that mean everything now but in the end won't mean a thing. Even an eight-year-old kid can be amazed at the resplendence of the Grand Canyon. I sure was. I'll never, ever, ever, *ever* forget its sheer purity and brilliant beauty.

I almost cried when it was time to leave. We were going to see some Indian ruins. I wanted to stay where I was: at the edge of a cliff gazing at the Grand Canyon's perfection. I was content to sit there and stare. I'd have stared until my eyes wore out if my parents had let me. The Grand Canyon changed my life in a subtle yet dramatic way: it made me realize that I am tiny and pathetic in the eyes of the universe. I am just a girl. I took only nine months to fully form and emerge. The Grand Canyon took tens of thousands of years to form. But in a way the canyon and I are similar: though I took nine months to form and the canyon many years, we aren't finished growing and changing. The canyon may create a new cliff or destroy an old one, and I may learn a new vital piece of information and forget an old one. Every day we change. The Grand Canyon and I.