

## Welcome Home

Coming back is like pressing down on an old, angry bruise. The ground sinks in when I step down from the bus, and the sand remembers me, and I don't know if that's good or bad. The coyotes watch with sharp eyes and bow their sleek canine heads. Here, there's only sky overhead and nothing underfoot but dust and sagebrush. Here, vultures wheel through the air, the baked blue sky suggesting nothing on the horizon except more of the same red canyonlands. Here, there is so much heat that I can taste the air, heavy and persistent, on the tip of my tongue. The birds start singing, but here, their calls are a high-pitched drone. When I draw close one of them opens its shiny beak and says, "Welcome back, we didn't miss you at all," and the taste of the wind sours and goes rotten in my mouth.

In town, there is asphalt that burns in the sun, the smell of tar, and tumbleweeds that blow past false fronts hiding the faces of windswept buildings. In town, as I prowl down the single street that slices through the heart of everything, the glares of passersby catch on my orange dress and faux leather boots, on the used bus ticket clutched in my hand, and I smile around at these people that I once knew. In the one room post office, it's cramped and hot, light washing in through the open door. There are flies fizzing around in the window and it distresses me to see their desperate escape attempts. I cough, and it's a meaningful cough, a traditional greeting in this dusty waterless place. The high-shouldered, long-necked old man by the counter raises his tortoise head, staring me down from behind glasses that flash in the sun.

"I'm looking for my grandmother, Sally Kewet." I say. The tortoise man nods. Maybe he didn't hear me over the noise of the overhead fan because he says nothing, just twists his hands together. I can't make out his eyes. Maybe he doesn't have any. So, I say it again, louder, until the words reverberate in my mouth enough to make my teeth ache. But it's just like how it was before I left this place, when I was a sullen teenager throwing questions at anyone who would

listen. The man sits up straight with great effort, as though it's the first time he stood to attention in his life. He tells me he's never heard that name before but he says it with a question mark at the end of the sentence. I walk back out into the heat, following the road to where the trailer used to be, but all I find is a deserted lot full of overgrown scrub and cigarette butts. I go back the way I came.

Later, I bunk down for the night in a cheap motel outside of town. The motel looks just like all other motels in the American Southwest, with peeling wallpaper, a floral bedspread, and an outdated TV that plays the same three gameshows no matter when you switch it on. Wheel of fortune, the Price is Right, Jeopardy. Later, lying on top of the scratchy blanket, sweating in my thin sleep shirt, I think of my grandmother and the stress lines in her forehead, which I recall like a vivid dream. The sweltering trailer next to the dry creek, listening to the mournful calls of coyotes, my grandmother reading from *Better Homes and Gardens* through a voice scratchy as a handful of gravel. The bad memories come too, the ringing silence after an argument, bottle rings on the table, a closed door. It all comes back in snatches of memory that bite at my heels. Tomorrow I'll surely find her, I think, sinking into a sleep that's full of moon-eyed ground owls and sly desert buzzards that surround me and that tell me to go home, go home before I forget why I came. "But I am home," I protest through numbed lips. The birds throw their heads back in laughter.

When I leave the motel the next morning, there's no one at the check-in desk. The wheeled chair spins in place. I wait for a while in the lobby with its cheerful yellow walls and chipped tile floors, but there's not a soul here and the sun is already inching its way above the horizon. I give up, leaving a pile of bills on the desk in an apologetic offering. When I make it back to town it appears different than it did yesterday, the bare landscape gone soft in the

morning light. I welcome the stiff breeze stirring the dead air and cooling the back of my neck and buy a map from the gas station, feeling industrious and organized.

When the sun reaches the middle of the sky and beats down without mercy I burrow into the shelter of a greasy monochrome diner. The waitress ushers me over to the bar, sliding me a slice of pie and a Coke, and it's all so clichéd that I think I must still be dreaming.

“What are you looking for, sweetie?” asks the waitress, like she knows I stumbled into town with a one-way ticket and like she can read how lost I am in the tense lines of my body. I can't say whether I recognize her, her heart-shaped face framed lovingly by dishwater blonde hair, or if the suggestable nature of this whole place has scrambled my mind.

“I used to live here. I'm looking for my grandmother, Sally Kewet.”

“Ah, so that's why you're in town. I was wondering. You don't look familiar.” The waitress wipes down the counter. There are flies buzzing around the overhead light. I shift on the cracked, sticky leather stool, hearing my flesh peel back from the seat with a bone-sharp snap.

“Did you know her? We used to live in the trailer park, out by Eagle Landing, but it isn't there anymore.”

“No, I can't say I did. But sweetie, here's the thing.” The woman fixes me with a stare, the first person to look at me clearly since I arrived, and she must remember a too-skinny girl with scuffed knees running into the diner to hide from the other kids, a hungry coyote of a girl who shuffled through life and wore her bruises in the open. “You look like a grown woman. Probably have a good job, a whole life behind you somewhere. Coming home can be a disorienting experience, and you won't always like what you find. Are you sure you want to be here, sweetie?”

“I just want answers.” I respond in a muddled tone. I hate the way her too-pink mouth curls down at the corners, the melting blue ice of her eyes going sweet and sad, rivers of

smudged mascara drying on her lashes. I don't want any of her sympathy, don't care even if she did know my grandmother. The flies around the ceiling are going crazy, buzzing against the light in a frantic dance. I throw some money down on the counter, for the straight-from-the-freezer cherry pie and for the lukewarm Coke, and this time the offering is not apologetic at all. The waitress shakes her head.

"You could try following the creek," she calls, still being so kind that it hurts to listen to her. "I heard the trailer park moved into the canyon."

So, I follow the dry creek and tell myself I'm doing so because I want to, trying to justify the whole plan from the start: the hot bus full of screaming children and aimless hollow-eyed wanderers, the sand and the birds who remember me and the strange town that doesn't. I follow that ragged scar in the earth and try to close myself to the swarm of memories. So, instead, I trace the thread of the moments that matter: those evenings when my grandmother's tense frame finally unwound after a day's work, and me, sitting cross-legged on the floor, knowing the calm wouldn't last. The way the night sky looked with no lights for miles, just a handful of bright stars that were close enough to pull down. The smell of sagebrush and the taste of the air after a fierce rain. Everything that makes up home, a place that I thought I'd buried for good.

The earth crunches under my new boots. Away from the buildings, it's just me and the wide-open landscape. But the land is quiet and there are no birds out watching. Even the coyotes hide in the folds of the land. And as twilight rolls in, the purple canyon emerges in the distance, a deep gash breaking up the face of the desert with a flock of tired gray mobile homes perched in its mouth. I know that before the night is over I will look my grandmother in the face, will count the stress lines in her forehead one-by-one, and it will be like I never left. "You've made it," whisper the little speckled geckos, looking up at me with their beetle-black eyes. "You've come all this way, and you've made it."

The trailer park looks the same as it did ten years ago, the forlorn sheets on washing lines hung out to dry, waving in the parched breeze, the cracked chrome homes with their American flags and lawn ornaments jammed into the dust. The people, too, I've seen before. Maybe they have more wrinkles or a new cloud of bone-weary exhaustion drags at their shoulders, but I know them. There's an old woman in a Grand Canyon souvenir t-shirt, leading a listless Chihuahua by a red leash, and young couple reminiscing in front of their trailer, and I'm glad to see them all. And yet, walking between the valleys formed by the trailers, I am invisible. I ask the woman with the dog if she knows my grandmother, but her gaze flows past and she only clicks her tongue at the depressed little dog, saying, "Come on, come on," and I am like a ghost. Maybe I have been since I first arrived. The Chihuahua is the only one who notices me, but a beacon of judgement shines from his giant eyes. I hurry onwards.

The purple-hued sky unfolds from a shimmering mirage, revealing my old house crouched in the sand as though waiting for me. I walk up the front steps, which speak a language of creaks and groans, and the door is unlocked and gives way gently under my hand. Inside, the light from the TV dresses everything in a sickening neon coat. In front of that flickering box sits my grandmother, propped up in a lazy-boy armchair of stained suede. Her head slumps at a sharp angle and spittle collects on her parted lips. The room is at sea, cans of cheap beer covering the furniture and layers of newspaper forming a strange nest upon the floor, and my grandmother adrift in the middle of it all. My questions blow away like dust. I forget everything I practiced on the bus during those long, transient hours, when I clutched the unspoken words in my hands like ammunition. And I know her, even after all the years. I sink to my knees by the chair, grabbing her hand. Her skin is dry and leathery, cratered with age spots, and her hand lies still and placid in mine. There's an oxygen tank hooked into her nose, and when she breathes the air whistles through her body with the sound of wind cutting through an empty canyon.

“Grandma?” The walls I maintained for so long fall away and my voice is left bare and shivering. She looks right into me and then past, drawn to the glow of the TV. “Grandma, it’s me.”

“Shh, shh. Cold,” she murmurs, rocking a little in the easy chair and curling her arms around her middle. The posture makes her appear younger, younger even then when she was first brought into the world. There’s no spark of recognition in her crinkled blue eyes, eyes that were so often covered by a pall of exhaustion, a lingering state that I resented more than her come-and-go anger. But she has deflated into an empty pile of skin and a folded flannel shirt. The air rushes out of my lungs, leaving me with this hollow shell of an old woman. There’s a buzzing under my skin again, and I’m not real. Everything buzzes, the TV, the lamp in the corner and the flies slapping against the screen door, and I’m just part of that buzzing.

I stumble out of the trailer, hear the soil whisper under my feet, and the ground remembers me. Maybe it’s the only thing that does. The desert’s memory is long and she recognizes her children, even the ones who leave. It’s cold now, the heat of the day having moved on. Past the trailer park, deeper into the canyon, the geckos weep under their sagebrush canopies, as if they know. Snakes tilt their clever heads to the side, rattling their tails in somber acknowledgement. I walk with no real destination in mind. There’s only my parched throat and the thrashing of my heart against my ribs. Here, this is the place I’m looking for, I think, lying down to let the sand press gently into my back and hair. And I know it’s a lie, but the ground is forgiving and it’s enough to rest a while in front of the bright stars. “Welcome back,” says the desert. “Welcome home.”