

Edge of the World

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Ronnie stared at the giant snakeskin nailed to the diner wall, wishing he could shed his own skin and start over. Fifty years, and what did he have to show for it? If he could count the number of hours he'd spent driving, that might be some kind of a record. Probably not, though, compared to any other career trucker. Or the number of meals eaten in rundown roadside diners like this one. Maybe even in this particular diner in Tucumcari, New Mexico. It was right on his I-40 route; he'd probably kept this place in business over the years.

Ronnie realized when he took a sip that his coffee had grown cold. He'd been staring at the snakeskin too long. Soon, he'd need to be back on the road. The waitress stopped by his table, coffee pot in one hand.

"Pancakes good today?" she asked.

He looked down at the plate, discovering he'd eaten about half of them. He sliced another bite and held it up on the prongs of his fork.

"Highlight of my week," he told her, voice tired.

She cocked her head at him, hand on hip.

"Why you all down today? You been coming in here regular for as long as I been here and I never seen you so down."

He chewed his pancake, waiting for her to walk away, but when she didn't he looked up and caught a raised eyebrow.

"It's just," he said, "I turned fifty a few days ago."

"Why didn't you tell me it was your birthday? Here, I'll go get some whipped cream for you."

"No, that's okay. I'm good."

She stopped, half a step away from the table, the coffee pot sloshing. He wanted to ask for a new cup, but his was still full, so he choked down some of the cold coffee and then pushed the mug toward her.

"Fifty's not so bad," she said as she poured the coffee. "You could easily have another fifty."

Easy for her to say—she was probably twenty. He looked down at his protruding gut, felt the pain in his low back that had been constant for a decade or so. Another fifty didn't seem too likely, or too desirable.

"It's just," he said, "I've never done anything interesting with my life. I just drive this same route over and over. This same stretch of highway."

"I know, huh. You think I landed up in this dump on purpose?"

"Sofia!" a man from the kitchen yelled.

She turned and shouted back, "*¡Espérate!*"

She tapped Ronnie's table with chipped red fingernails.

"I'll be back with your whipped cream. Goes real nice on those pancakes."

"Just the check's fine," he said.

"Bueno. If you say so."

She fished the bill out of her apron pocket and tented it next to his now-lukewarm coffee.

After he'd cashed out, Ronnie put on his coat and extracted himself from the booth, using more effort than he'd want to admit. Sofia burst out of the kitchen with a tray of food, the man in

the back yelling at her again. She rattled the plates onto the table of a road-tripping family and yelled back in fast Spanish. Ronnie only caught a few words, most of them foul. Their argument reached a climax outside the kitchen door, and she dropped the tray, yanked off her apron and threw it at the man. Ronnie turned away, embarrassed, and hurried outside. Definitely time to get back on the road.

He was climbing into the cab of his semi when he heard her voice behind him.

"Hey!" she yelled. "Hey, can I ask you something?"

He paused, one foot on the step.

"Hey, you're probably not supposed to take passengers, huh? But could you just get me outta here?"

It was true, he wasn't technically supposed to give rides, but he'd picked up his share of hitchhikers over the years.

"Where you going? I got a route I can't vary from."

"Wherever," she said. "Just not here."

"I guess so, then."

She held up a finger and skipped backward toward the restaurant.

"Just let me grab something."

Ronnie climbed into his truck, started the engine and turned on the heat. He watched the wind bend the branches of a juniper on the edge of the parking lot. A moment later Sofia raced out of the diner, a backpack bouncing against her back. She climbed in and slammed the door.

"Bueno, let's go."

Ronnie radioed his dispatcher.

"Are we going or what?" Sofia said.

She twisted the straps of her backpack between her hands. Her knee bounced nervously.

"We're goin'," Ronnie said.

He put the truck into gear. Sofia slunk down in the seat, her head below the window.

Ronnie raised his eyebrow at her as he pulled the truck onto the on-ramp, but she wasn't looking at him.

A few miles down the road, she relaxed. She pulled a wad of bills from her backpack and held them out to Ronnie.

"Here," she said. "For helping me out."

He took the crumpled money, but looked at it like she'd just handed him a dirty tissue.

"What did you do, empty the cash drawer before you left?"

She zipped the backpack, sat back and crossed her arms.

"Yep."

"Shit. Did he see you leave with me?"

She shrugged.

"That's why I was all wanting you to speed it up."

"For future reference, a semi makes a terrible getaway car."

He pushed the money back toward her, but she kept her arms crossed. He stuffed it into the center console, then wiped his hand on his jeans as if he could smear the crime away.

"What if he calls the cops, gives them my license plate, my truck number? I could get fired. We could both go to jail!"

"He's not gonna call the cops."

"You don't know that."

"He's not a cops-calling kind of guy."

"What?"

"Trust me. He doesn't get all involved with the law."

Ronnie let out a long sigh. He stared out at the highway, stretching as far as he could see to a desert horizon. Fog hovered over a bosque as the truck rumbled across a low concrete bridge. A billboard advertised scuba diving at a lake in Santa Rosa; another one, a year-round fireworks stand. Something dead lay splattered in fur and blood on the highway's shoulder.

"How far you want to go?" he asked.

"Where's your stop?"

"Flagstaff."

"Bueno."

She stared out the window. The radio hissed, in between stations, but Ronnie left it to fill the silence.

"So, why you working on your birthday?" she finally said.

"I'm not. It was a few days ago."

He'd actually been driving then, too, but he didn't care to tell her that.

"Oh. You do anything fun?"

"Had dinner with my sister."

She'd given him a card decorated with tombstones that read "Over the Hill" and sang "I Ain't as Good as I Once Was" from a sound chip when he opened it.

"What would you want to do?" she asked.

"What?"

"I mean, if you could do anything. What would you do? Where would you go?"

"I don't know."

"Like, you drive all the time. You've probably seen all those roadside attractions, no? World's Biggest Ball of Yarn, Tallest Cross, Yellowstone, Grand Canyon, all that, huh? What's left on the list?"

"Well, no, actually."

"What do you mean, no?"

"I've never stopped at any of those."

"Why not?"

"It's tourist stuff."

"Don't you ever get curious about them, though?"

"Well," he said. "I have always wanted to go to the Grand Canyon. I think about it every time I drive past the turnoff by Flagstaff. I heard there's this glass bridge that goes right out over the canyon. I always thought it would feel like stepping off the edge of the world."

"Sounds terrifying."

"Have you ever been there? The canyon, I mean."

"Nope."

He glanced over at her. She was doing that knee-bounce thing again.

"So what's your story?" he said. "You from Tucumcari, originally?"

She shifted uncomfortably, checked the zippers on her backpack.

"Nope," she said, the word clipped, staccato.

"Santa Rosa?" Silence. "Vegas?"

"It's not a town, where I'm from."

"Oh. How'd you end up in Tucumcari, then?"

"Bout the same as how I'm going to land up in Flagstaff."

Ronnie changed lanes to pass a car. Teenage boys flapped at him from inside it, trying to get him to pull his horn. He ignored them, and merged the truck back into the right lane.

"I stop sometimes up here in Moriarty. You need to?"

"I'm good. Sooner we get to Flagstaff, the better."

She turned up the radio and faced away from him, resting her head on the seat.

She slept most of the way, past the turquoise overpasses of Albuquerque, past the red cliffs at the Arizona-New Mexico border. Her face pressed against the window, arms crossed tight over her chest. Ronnie drove, like he always drove. He could remember years ago when he used to be excited by the navigation of a new route, by the challenge of a mechanical issue, by the different landscapes he'd see in a day. But it had all become routine now, the roads blurring together. Most of the other drivers he talked to at stops had families someplace. Ronnie had a mother, so deaf and forgetful it was hardly worth the effort anymore, and a sister who had married a guy who used to beat Ronnie up in high school, and they'd had a couple of obnoxious kids. He bought the kids souvenir T-shirts from the Stuckeys outside of Amarillo and his sister made them handwrite Thank You notes to him. Other drivers said he needed to find a Mrs., but that was something Ronnie had no interest in. Never had.

Flagstaff came into view, a red sunset behind it. Sofia woke when the truck decelerated on the exit ramp. She yawned, then poked her finger at the window.

"*Mira*," she said, "they even have shuttles."

"What?"

"To the Grand Canyon. That sign said they have shuttles."

"Yeah."

"Let's go tomorrow."

"Um."

"You gotta get back on the road right away?"

He was scheduled for a thirty-four hour restart. Usually he spent most of that time watching TV with his feet up so his back would stop hurting, or sometimes he went out to a sports bar if there was a good game on.

"No, but—"

"But nothing. It's right there."

"We'll see."

He felt something stir inside him, an uncomfortable sensation at first. Yes, he wanted to go. At least go touch it, to say that he had. He didn't want to camp or hike or ride a mule down a narrow ledge. He just wanted to stand at the rim and feel that vast emptiness yawning out before him.

He made his drop-off, and Sofia stayed in the cab while he helped unload. At the motel later, they rented separate rooms. Ronnie lay on the bed, hands on his belly, and couldn't sleep. He got up and found the tourist magazine beside the TV. He flipped past ads for hot air balloon rides and expensive resorts. He found an article on the Canyon, started to read it and then slapped the magazine shut, deciding he didn't want anything to influence his experience. God, he felt like a kid, like when they'd gone to the zoo or to a hockey game. It was also, he realized with some concern, quite similar to the flutter he felt in his chest sometimes when he took stairs too fast. He took a deep breath, let it out slow. Come on. It was just a big hole in the ground. It wasn't worth all that.

In the morning, Sofia knocked on his door. She handed him a Styrofoam box and he opened it to find a stack of soggy pancakes. He laughed.

"Hey, thanks," he said.

He sat on the edge of the bed and ate them with a plastic fork while she hovered near the open door. He held the box out to her.

"You want some?"

"I ate already."

He nodded, took another bite.

"So where's this shuttle?" he asked.

"You want to go?"

"I've got the day off."

She dialed the number from the motel phone.

The shuttle was crowded. Ronnie's knees pressed against the felt-covered seat in front of him; the seat divider between he and Sofia dug into his side. A man with a microphone stood at the front of the shuttle, rambling on about the history of Grand Canyon National Park, but Ronnie only heard about half of it because two women across the aisle from him talked the whole time. It was nearly a two hour drive. Ronnie hated being a passenger. Every bump and curve made him nervous, made him feel out of control.

Once they arrived at the Visitor Center, he learned that the glass bridge, called the Skywalk, was actually in a different part of the canyon, a hundred or so miles to the west.

Sofia lingered in the Visitor Center, but Ronnie went outside. He walked down a short pathway and then stood on a concrete platform that looked out across the canyon. It was huge.

Bigger than he had imagined. And it wasn't just a vast hole. It was an infinite vista of peaks and valleys, sharp towers of sandstone and shadowy plunging pits. He felt that flutter in his chest again, and then it cracked like an egg and spread into a sensation of awe. He wanted to just gaze into the canyon for hours, marveling at the geologic magnitude.

Someone elbowed him in his left side. Someone else stepped on his right foot. The screams of two children fighting over a video game shattered the spell and he could no longer focus on the carved earth before him. He was aware only of the noisy primates crawling along its rim. The metal bar on the safety fence shifted a bit as he leaned his weight against it, and he thought for a moment that the canyon might maliciously decide to swallow them all up. If it did, he thought it might just spit them out. Ronnie sighed and turned away from the view. He pushed through the crowd and found Sofia sitting on a rock. She smoked a cigarette, flicking the ashes off the side of the platform.

"So," she said. "Is it everything you dreamed of?"

"Think I'm going to take one of those guided walks. Want to come with me?"

"Yeah, what the hell."

A woman nearby made an exaggerated show of waving away Sofia's smoke. Sofia responded by blowing a stream toward the woman's face.

"Ma'am," a park ranger said, seeming to appear out of nowhere. "There are fire restrictions in the park. This is a no-smoking zone."

Sofia took another drag, then stubbed it out on the railing. The park ranger walked away, giving Ronnie a disapproving look, and he realized the ranger probably assumed Sofia was his unruly daughter. Even if she had been, she was a damn adult. He glared back at the ranger.

The guided walk started off fine. The sun was out and Ronnie took off his jacket and carried it over his arm. An animated boy about Sofia's age guided the tour, and the group of people moved along at turtle pace, stopping every few feet for a new fact about the flora, fauna or geology. Ronnie trailed along the edges of the group for a little breathing room. The path they walked gave an even better view than the platform.

Then people started asking questions.

"Was it the Indians who made the canyon?"

"What time do they light it up at night?"

"Is that really Mexico on the other side?"

"I heard there was an elevator takes you to the bottom. Where's that at?"

Ronnie grew more and more irritated with each dumb question, amazed at the patience with which the tour guide answered them. He decided he had two choices: either push the question-askers into the canyon, or leave the group. He chose to leave the group.

Sofia caught up with him, but to his relief, she didn't say anything. Didn't ask him what was wrong or try to console him or talk about the people. She just lit another cigarette and walked beside him.

Later, when they were seated at a restaurant eating Grand Burgers, she said, "Not what you thought it would be?"

"I didn't come here to listen to a bunch of idiots and their screaming kids."

"I meant the burger."

"Oh. That either."

He let it flop back onto the plate. The bun slid off.

"You're not really a people person, huh?" she said.

"I guess that's true."

There were whole days when the only people he spoke to were his dispatcher and maybe the cashier at a gas station. He realized he was okay with that. The routine of his job had started to bother him, but not the isolation.

"That *was* annoying, though," she said. "It's probably good you stormed off when you did. I was thinking about pushing her in."

Ronnie smiled in spite of himself.

"You want to see anything else before the shuttle heads back?" she said.

"Nah. Maybe someday I'll go see the Skywalk, see if it's a little less crowded over there."

"Stepping off the edge of the world," Sofia said.

There was no sarcasm or malice in her tone, but the repetition of his own words embarrassed him.

"Eh," he said, and pushed the plate to the side of the table. "It's a stupid thing."

"It's not stupid," she said softly.

She stared at the table while the server took their plates away.

In the morning, she was gone. Ronnie went to her room to see if she wanted breakfast, and found the door open. The bed was disheveled and the room key lay on the floor. The door had some scratches near the latch, but he couldn't tell if they were new or not. He remembered what she had said about her boss back in Tucumcari, that he wasn't a "cops kind of guy." Ronnie imagined the boss tracking her down, dragging her out of the room in the middle of the night.

But her bag and her clothes were all gone too. Maybe she'd just decided to stop hanging around him and start her new life in Flagstaff. He considered calling the police just in case, but

realized he didn't even know her last name. He took some bagels and hardboiled eggs from the motel's continental breakfast and spent most of the day watching TV in his room. The next morning he'd go get his truck and start the drive back east. His sister texted him to ask when he'd be back, but he ignored her.

He stopped in Santa Rosa so he wouldn't have to stop in Tucumcari. Whatever had happened to Sofia, Ronnie wouldn't be visiting that diner again for awhile. When he pulled back onto the highway, he looked at the road stretching in front of him. He looked in the truck's side mirrors at the road stretching behind him. Somehow, there wasn't a single other vehicle in sight.

He spotted a historical marker up ahead, with a wide parking lot and a tall sign, and decided to pull the truck into it. The wind blew slightly and he reached back into the cab for his jacket. The desert could be deceptively cold this time of year, even in the mid-afternoon sun.

He read the historical sign and looked at the sepia photographs, but the history wasn't anything he was interested in. A car swished by on the highway behind him.

Ronnie stepped out of the parking lot, the rocky ground crunching beneath his boots. He stepped around spikes of yucca and tufts of sage. He stepped over a short barbed wire fence, and headed toward a mesa that jutted up from the land.

The mesa rose higher than he thought it would, but Ronnie climbed it. He paused for breath, hands on his knees, his throat burning. He turned around and looked at the highway. Another truck rolled by, but he was far enough away that the sound of it blended in with the wind. He kept climbing.

At the top of the mesa he caught his breath. His heartbeat thumped in his ears. He looked around and thought that if he were to collapse here, it wouldn't be a bad place to die. But gradually his heartbeat slowed and he was able to stand upright and really look around.

He walked to the edge of the mesa, and stood with his toes as close to the drop-off as he could. The land stretched out below him, unbroken by roads or towns or railroads. He couldn't see any power lines out here. There weren't even any planes in the sky. He closed his eyes and felt the space. This was what he had thought he would feel at the Grand Canyon, an unfiltered encounter with the grandness of this planet he crawled back and forth across. He opened his eyes. He could see for miles. He could see across state lines. He could see the oceans, the equator, the polar caps. He wasn't at the edge of the world. No, he was right in the middle of it.